君の話

三秋縋

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Your story

早川書房

Your Story

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Oh! We have our pockets full,
We poets, of love-letters, writ to Chloes,
Daphnes - creations of our noddle-heads.
Our lady-loves - phantasms of our brains -
Dream-fancies blown into soap-bubbles! Come!
Take it, and change feigned love-words into true.

- Edmond Rostand, “Cyrano de Bergerac”

Chapter 1: Green Green

I have a childhood friend who I've never met. I've never seen her face. I've never heard her speak. I've never even touched her. Despite that, I know the darling features of her face. I know the softness of her voice. I know the warmth in her palms.

She doesn't exist. To be more precise, she exists only in my memory. It might sound like I'm talking about the deceased, but that's not it. She never existed from the beginning.

She was a girl created just for me, and her name was Touka Natsunagi.

A Substite. A so-called denizen of Mimories. To put it bluntly, a fictional person.

My parents loved fiction more than anything. Or maybe they hated reality more than anything. Rather than take a vacation, they'd buy Mimories of having taken a vacation. Instead of putting on a party, they'd buy Mimories of having a party. They wouldn't plan a wedding, but they'd buy Mimories of a wedding. Those were the sorts of people who raised me.

Ours really was an irregular family.

My dad would often call my mom the wrong name. Even just from what I personally heard, he had at least five different ways of getting it wrong. Though a married man, he'd bought multiple Honeymoons. Ranging from old enough to be his mother to old enough to be his daughter, he apparently had Substite ex-wives with ages spaced about 10 years apart.

My mom never called my dad the wrong name. Instead, it was me she always misnamed. Even though I was an only child, mom seemed to have four children. Me, and three Substite children

birthed by Angel. Their names also followed a pattern that mine did not.

Now, if I was always getting my dad's name wrong, then we'd have a perfect loop. But sadly, I never got any Mimories when I was young. My parents never laid a finger on my memory. It's not like they lacked the cash to buy Mimories for their child. As faulty a family as we were, money was one thing we did have. It was just how they chose to raise me.

It was widely known that implanting children with Mimories of unconditional love and success in their formative years had favorable effects on emotional development. In some cases, these could be far more effective than real unconditional love and success. Because false memories crafted to suit the individual worked much more directly than real experiences full of distractions.

I doubt my parents didn't know about those findings. And yet, they chose not to buy me any Mimories.

"Mimories are like an artificial limb or an artificial eye - they're only meant to fill what's not there," my dad often told me. "Once you're older and you know what you're missing, then you can buy all the Mimories you like."

It seemed they bought into the platitudes the manufacturers and clinics gave about changing memory - comforting excuses told to relieve any guilt over fabricating your past with Mimories. I had trouble imagining what kind of "missing thing" necessitated having five ex-wives.

Those two who dwelled in a fictional past avoided real contact with their family. They kept communication to a minimum, got meals separately, left the house early every morning and came

back late, and went out on days off without telling the other where they were going. They seemed convinced that their self that existed here wasn't the real self. Or maybe they had to think that way to keep going. And needless to say, while they were doing this, they were completely neglecting me.

If they weren't going to be diligent parents, they should've just let their kid indulge in Mimories like they did. That was what I always thought when I was young.

Growing up not knowing real love nor fictional love, I was raised into a person who had no clue how to love people or receive love. Unable to properly imagine being accepted by another person, I'd forgo communication in the first place. Even if I was lucky enough for someone to take an interest in me, there came a baseless fear that they'd soon be disappointed in me, so I pushed them away before that happened. As a result, I had a terribly lonely youth.

When I turned fifteen, my parents divorced. They explained to me that they'd decided on it long ago, but all I could think was, so what? Did they think giving a lot of thought to the decision softened it? Surely a planned murder is more criminal than a spontaneous one.

After some back and forth, my dad ended up with custody of me. Just once after that, I happened to meet my mom while on a trip, but she passed by me without a glance, as if I didn't even enter her field of view. To my knowledge, my mom's not a good enough actor to fake that. I took it to mean she used Lethe to erase all memories of her family.

Now, I was a total stranger to her.

I went right past shock to feeling a bit of admiration. I could

honestly be envious of such commitment to a way of life. I could follow that example, I thought.

It happened about half a year after turning 19.

That moment when I turned out the light in my room, drank cheap beer, and looked back on my life thus far, I realized that in those nineteen years, I didn't have a single memory worth calling a memory.

They were such gray days. Kindergarten, elementary school, middle school, high school, college... No hue, no lighting, no intensity. Just monotone gray stretching out into the horizon. Even the rawness of "a childhood that never went my way" was nowhere to be found.

I then innately understood. "I get it now. Of course people as empty as this would cling to false memories."

Even then, I didn't feel the urge to buy Mimories. Maybe it was rebellion against the lie-living family who raised me, but I'd come to hate Mimories, and fiction of all kinds. Even the most insipid life felt so much better than a life full of false ostentation. Even the greatest of stories seemed to me worthless, simply because they were fabricated.

I didn't need Mimories, but the idea of tampering with memory wasn't bad in itself. From that day forth, I did nothing but work part-time jobs. My dad was sending me a decent allowance, but I wanted to settle this on my own as much as possible.

My goal was to buy some Lethe.

It was such an empty life, I thought, I might as well forget it all.

When there's nothing in a place where there should be something, it makes you feel empty. But if you got rid of that

“place” entirely, the emptiness would vanish with it.

“Emptiness” can’t exist without a container to be empty.

I wanted to approach absolute zero.

I saved up money for four months. Then I withdrew all the part-time pay from my bank account, walked to the clinic, spent half a day in counseling to create a personal record, and returned home exhausted. And I celebrated with drinks, all by myself. For the first time in my life, I felt like I’d accomplished something.

During counseling, I was put into a hypnotic state with depressants, so I don’t remember what I said. But once I’d left the clinic and was by myself, a regret bubbled to the surface: “I talked too much.” Most likely, I’d been frank about some embarrassing desires or something. It was vague, but that’s the feeling I got. Even if my brain didn’t remember, it was remembered somewhere in my body.

Counseling was usually conducted over several days. So the fact mine got done in just half of one was undeniable proof of how empty my past was.

One month later, I received a package containing Lethe. I’d seen my parents take doses of memory-altering nanobots countless times, so I didn’t even need to read the attached instructions. I poured the powder-like nanobots out of the paper package into water, then drank it in one gulp. Then I got down on the floor, and waited for my gray days to turn a blank white.

Now I can forget everything, I thought.

Of course, in reality, it’s not like it removes all memories. It’s designed to preserve the memories you need to carry on with your day-to-day life, and Lethe only affects episodic memories in the first place. Declarative memory and semantic memory aren’t impacted.

Nondeclarative memory remains as untouched as possible. This is common to all memory-altering nanobots, so the same restrictions apply to the implanting of memories. That's why the development of Mnemosyne, which provides instant omniscience and omnipotence, is having difficulties. It's not possible to forget knowledge or skills with Lethe. All you can lose is recollections.

I chose to erase all my memories from age 6 to age 15. You generally order memory erasure by specifying "memories related to..."; people like me who want whole periods of time erased are apparently uncommon. I guess that does make sense. They just want to cut out the suffering from their lives, not to eradicate them as a whole.

I looked at the clock sitting on the table. I waited and waited, but no symptoms of memory loss came. Normally, the nanobots would reach the brain after 5 minutes and complete the memory erasure in 30. But an hour later, I observed no changes to the memories of my youth. I could remember almost drowning during swimming lessons when I was six, I could remember being in the hospital with pneumonia for a month when I was eleven, I could remember having that accident when I was fourteen and getting three stitches in my knee. I could even remember all the names of my mom's fictional daughters and my dad's fictional ex-wives. I was getting more and more uneasy. Don't tell me I was given a fake product? Or maybe this is just how memory erasure works. When you completely forget a memory, maybe you can't even realize that memory disappeared.

Just as I was attempting to assuage my fears with that convenient reasoning, I noticed a foreign presence in my past.

I hurriedly raised myself, took the package out of the trash,

and read the attached paper.

I prayed that it wasn't so. But it was.

There had been some kind of mistake. I hadn't been sent Lethe. These were different nanobots - mainly used by those who had an unfulfilling youth - that were programmed to provide a fictional childhood.

Green Green.

That was what I'd swallowed.

The gray horizon had turned not to white, but to green.

I could understand why the clinic would have mixed up the two. Maybe my counselor heard "I don't have any good memories of youth, so I want to forget everything," only got the first part, and jumped to a hasty conclusion.

Certainly, it's what you'd normally do. It's the natural conclusion: if you don't have good memories, get some. It was partially my fault for not emphasizing. Most importantly, it was my crucial mistake to not look carefully at the documents I was signing.

Because of this mistake, I'd unintentionally become one of those people I so despised.

I couldn't help but feel it was somehow fateful.

I told the clinic I'd received something other than what I'd ordered, and immediately got an apology call. About two weeks later, I was sent two packages of Lethe. One was for erasing the memories of my youth, and the other was for erasing my false experiences with the fictional person Touka Natsunagi.

But I didn't feel like taking either of them, so I stuck them in a closet without even unsealing them. I hesitated to even just leave them within sight.

I was afraid.

I didn't want to have that feeling again.

To tell the truth, when I realized I'd ingested Green Green instead of Lethe, I was secretly relieved.

I think I finally understood, then, why there are so few repeat users of Lethe compared to other nanobots.

And thus, I had been implanted with memories of a fictional childhood. But they were a tad biased. Normally, the Mimories provided by Green Green are supposed to be spread even, from memories of fun times with friends to overcoming difficulties with them. But for some reason, my Mimories were focused on episodes with a single childhood friend.

Mimories are created based on a document - the "personal record" - systematically generated by having a program analyze the data obtained in counseling. In other words, the Mimory engineer who created these Mimories looked over my personal record and decided "this is the kind of past this guy needs."

I had a gut feeling about why there was only the one childhood friend. The engineer must have thought, since I had a lonely youth where I received no affection from my family, and lacked any friends or girlfriends, giving me someone who could feel like family, a friend, and a girlfriend would just be efficient. Combining those duties into one person would save time versus making multiple people, and with that spare energy, you could dig deeper with the single character.

In truth, Touka Natsunagi was the ideal person for me. She matched my tastes in every way; I might call her the ultimate girl. Every time I thought about her, I couldn't help but think "Ahh, if I really had a childhood friend like this, how wonderful those days

would have been.”

And that’s exactly why I wasn’t pleased with these Mimories.

What’s more hollow than the fact that the most beautiful memories in my mind were someone else’s fabrication?

*

“You should probably wake up soon,” she said.

“I’m still fine,” I replied with eyes closed.

“I’ll prank you if you don’t wake up,” she whispered in my ear.

“Go ahead,” I muttered, and turned over in bed.

“Wonder what I should do?” She snickered.

“Whatever it is, I’ll get even later,” I laughed.

“Sir,” she said modestly.

“You should just sleep here too, Touka,” I invited.

“Sir?”

I woke up.

“Are you all right?”

I looked toward the voice, and saw a female employee in a yukata-like uniform leaning down to look at my face. I sat up and looked around as my eyes came into focus, and after a pause, remembered I was in a pub. I must have fallen asleep while drinking.

“Are you all right?”, she asked me again. She seemed a little embarrassed to have listened in on my dream. “Could you get me some water?”, I requested calmly. She smiled and nodded, then went to get a pitcher.

I looked at my watch. I believe it was 3 PM when I started drinking, and now it was already 6.

I gulped down the water the waitress brought, paid the bill, and left. As soon as I exited, a sticky heat surrounded my body. When I thought of my unair-conditioned room, I started to get depressed. It was probably like a sauna by now.

The shopping district was packed with people. Girls in real yukata, not an imitation like the waitress wore, passed in front of me cheerfully. White smoke carrying smells of burnt sauce and grilled meat wafted in and tickled my nose. People talking, carts calling in customers, the sound of crosswalk signals, the low engine hum of a dynamo, and distant sounds of flutes and booming taiko drums - all of them mixed together and covered the town.

August 1st. Today was the summer festival.

I considered it an event that had no relevance to me at all.

Going against the crowd that was headed towards the festival, I started walking to my apartment. As the sun got lower, the crowd densified; if I wasn't careful, I could get swept away. The sweaty faces of passersby were lit by the westering sun, glowing a light orange.

I made a mistake in going to the shrine, thinking I could get around that way. The area was jam-packed with people there for the carts stationed along the path, as well as people taking a break. As I bumped up against the crowd, the cigarettes in my chest pocket were crushed, I got sauce stains on my shirt, and my toes were stomped on by geta sandals. It no longer seemed possible to willfully decide my own direction, so I gave myself up to the flow, waiting until I naturally arrived outside.

At last, I made it out of the shrine area, and as I started down the stairs to the exit...

Suddenly, I heard a voice.

“Hey, you want to kiss?”

I know this. This is the work of Green Green. It’s no more than a hallucination caused by association with the summer festival. Maybe there were still traces of the dream I was having in the pub.

I tried to think about something else to distract myself. But once an association starts, it picks up the more you try to stop it; the Mimories rising from the back of your mind become more vivid as you try to avoid remembering them. Before I knew it, my consciousness had traveled back to my fictional youth.

“Apparently people think we’re dating.”

Touka and I were visiting the local shrine. After going around and visiting all the carts, we sat together on the corner of the back steps, casually gazing at the crowds below.

I was in my usual attire, but Touka was wearing a yukata. A fireworks-patterned deep blue yukata, and red chrysanthemums in her hair. Both were a more subdued color than what she’d worn last year, which might be why she felt a little more mature.

“Even though we’re just childhood friends, you know?”

With that, Touka took a swig of a soft drink with an unhealthy-looking color, then lightly coughed. Then she glanced at me to see my reaction.

“If someone sees us together like this, it might add to the misunderstandings,” I replied with careful wording.

“Good point.” Touka giggled. Then as if suddenly remembering something, she put her hand on mine. “If they saw something like this, it might make things even worse.”

“Cut it out.”

That’s why my mouth said, but my hand didn’t push away

Touka's. Instead, I casually looked over our surroundings. I was torn between the worry of someone I knew seeing and teasing us, and the hope that someone would come and do exactly that.

Well, maybe the latter was winning a little.

I was fifteen, and it was around then that I started to see Touka in a romantic light. In my second year of middle school, we went into different classes, sharply decreasing the amount of time we spent together - and this was what set it off. It was in that year I had the painful realization that my childhood friend, who until then I considered to be like family, was in fact a regular girl like any of the other girls in class.

And at the same time, I became conscious of my romantic attraction to her. Once I could take a step away from preconceptions to look at it, I saw that Touka Natsunagi was a very beautiful girl. From that point on, I'd find myself lost in her face which should have been very familiar to me, and I often felt restless just seeing her talking with other boys.

Maybe the reason I'd gone without any interest in girls until then is because my ideal partner was with me from the start.

Because of our long acquaintance, I quickly noticed that Touka was going through a similar mental change. From the summer of our second year of middle school, she started treating me in a more awkward way. Though she acted the same as ever on the surface, through careful observation, I could see she was just trying to imitate her past behavior. She must've been doing her best to preserve our casual relationship.

When third year came and we were back to being in the same class, we started sticking together constantly, as if rebounding from the previous year. We didn't directly ask each other's feelings, but

occasionally we'd nonchalantly send out a probe. With methods like saying "we got mistaken for a couple again" and watching the other's expression - as she just did - or half-jokingly holding hands and waiting for a reaction.

Through trial and error, we were deepening our conviction that we felt the same way.

And that day, Touka entered the final stage of confirmation.

"Hey, you want to kiss?"

She spoke to me as I sat beside her, with her gaze still fixed on the view below.

She said it like it just occurred to her suddenly, but I knew she had been sitting on those words for a long time.

After all, for a long time, I'd had something very similar prepared.

"Come on, let's test if we're really just friends or not," Touka explained with a flippant air. "Maybe we'll be surprised to find our hearts racing."

"Who knows," I replied just as casually. "I'd bet we won't feel anything, though."

"You think?"

"Probably."

"Well, let's try it."

Touka faced me and closed her eyes.

This is strictly just messing around. An experiment for curiosity's sake. And I mean, a kiss isn't that big a deal. After putting up all those defenses, we swiftly locked lips.

After our lips parted, we faced each other again as if it were nothing.

"How was it?", I asked. It came out weirdly dry, almost like it

wasn't my own voice.

"Hmm..." Touka lowered her head slightly. "No big heart-pounding here. You?"

"Me neither."

"Huh."

"Hey, I told you, right? Won't feel anything."

"Yeah. Sure enough, I guess we're just childhood friends."

It was a conversation of barefaced lies. I wanted to kiss Touka again right away, and I wanted to confirm all sorts of things beyond that, too. Her same feelings came through in the movement of her eyes and her shaky voice, and I knew the slight pause before her first reply was because she had to decide against saying "I wasn't really sure, so let's try it again."

Really, it was probably the plan to keep things up this way until a confession. And in fact, I had constructed a very similar plan. And yet in those few brief seconds our lips touched, my thoughts changed greatly. "You can't advance any further," the cells in my body warned.

If you go any further, everything will change.

In exchange for momentary stimulation and excitement, this comfortable thing between us would be gone for good.

And then there'd be no going back to a relationship like we have now.

Touka must have noticed that too. She hurriedly changed the plan, it seems, to play it all off as a joke.

I was grateful for her prudent decision. Because if she had gone and opened her heart to me, I'd never be able to refuse.

On the way home, Touka remembered something and spoke up.

“By the way, that was my first time.”

I feigned ignorance. “First time what?”

“Kissing. Was it yours, Chihiro?”

“It’s my third.”

“Huh?” Touka’s eyes widened, and she stopped. “When? Who?”

“You don’t remember?”

“...Were the other two with me?”

“In the closet at my house when I was 7, in the study at your house when I was 10.”

After a few seconds of silence: “Oh, you’re right,” Touka mumbled.

“Wow, good memory.”

“You’re just forgetful, Touka.”

“Sorry.”

“I bet you’ll forget about today in a few years too.”

“Huh, so that was the third time...”

Touka fell silent for a moment, then flashed a grin.

“Well, then it’s actually the fourth.”

This time, I was the one surprised.

“When?”

“Not telling,” she said with a composed look. “But it was pretty recent.”

“Don’t remember it.”

“Well, you were asleep, Chihiro.”

“...I didn’t notice.”

“Ahaha. That was the idea.”

“Sneaky.”

“Sneaky, right?”

Touka puffed out her chest and laughed.

Then it's really the fifth, I mumbled under my breath.

At least it's both of us being sneaky.

Countless sugary-sweet false memories like that existed in my brain. And every little detail popped up in the back of my mind so much more vividly than any real memory, violently shaking my heart.

Worryingly, unlike normal memories, you can't count on Mimories to be forgotten over time. They're like tattoos; they won't disappear naturally. According to a clinical study, patients with New Alzheimer's disease who have Mimories implanted, even after all their memories are lost, will still have their Mimories for a while longer. That's just how powerful the memory-altering nanobots are. The only way to forget Mimories from Green Green is to take Lethe designed specifically to erase them.

Face my fear and take the Lethe, or make a compromise with the Mimories. I wavered between my two options for a long time.

As long as I didn't erase those Mimories, I would forever be trapped by memories with a childhood friend who didn't exist.

I hung my head and sighed. I was fed up with my own indecisiveness.

I looked up to find the torii in front of me. It seemed I'd reached the entrance while lost in thought. I was relieved: now I could finally escape the festival. So long as I was here, I'd keep thinking about that past that didn't exist.

Then, I heard an explosive sound. I looked up on reflex, and saw a firework launched into the night sky. The next town over must have been doing a fireworks show. I looked down,

and thought I heard someone say “turn around right now.”

I unconsciously slowed my pace.

I looked over my shoulder.

Among the crowd, I instantly spotted her.

And she, too, was looking back at me.

Yes, there was a girl there.

Black hair ran down to her shoulder blades.

She wore a deep blue, fireworks-patterned yukata.

With attention-grabbing pale skin.

And red chrysanthemums in her hair.

Our eyes met.

Time stopped.

I knew it intuitively.

She had the same memories.

The noise of the festival grew distant.

Everything but her lost its color.

I need to go after her, I thought.

I need to talk to her, I thought.

I decided to head toward her.

She decided to head toward me.

But the crowd mercilessly dragged us away, and pulled us apart.

In the blink of an eye, I lost sight of her.

Chapter 2: Firefly's Light

If someone as empty as me were to have a friend, that friend would have to be someone just as empty; that's what I dimly figured in my youth. If I ever met someone who was the very picture of a "have-not" - no friends or lovers, no excellent qualities or proud experiences, not even a single heartwarming memory - I supposed that would be the first time I could call someone a friend.

Emori was my first - and currently last - friend, but contrary to my predictions, he was a "have." He had tons of friends, frequently changed romantic partners, was fluent in three languages, and was set for employment at a leading corporation at the time I met him. In essence, he was my opposite in every way.

I became close with Emori the summer when I was 16. At the time, we were enrolled at the same university, and lived in the same apartment complex. I was in 201 and he was in 203, two doors down, so I often saw him bringing a girl over. Who exactly it was changed almost by the month, and they were all extraordinarily pretty without exception. I occasionally spotted him on campus as well, always surrounded by many friends and laughing. When there was some school event, he was generally in the center of it. Him just standing up on stage earned him fierce cheering.

Ah, so lives like that exist, I would often remark. He lived in a world my imagination could never dream up.

How must it feel to take being liked for granted?

As for why a guy as popular as Emori felt like befriending an outcast like me, I still don't know. Maybe it was sort of a cultural exchange thing. Maybe he also found in me a world *he* couldn't imagine, and decided to observe me up close as a social studies

exercise.

If not that, it's possible he had me set aside as someone he could talk to who wouldn't be able to spread secrets. He had many people's favor, but that meant there would be at least a few who considered him an enemy. Maybe I was an ideal partner for telling secrets that he didn't want those people to hear.

In any event, we became friends. That was the extent of it. And this was a result of Emori approaching me. He engaged with me feeling there was no chance he'd be refused, and with that kind of attitude, I also felt that it would be wrong for me to refuse him. Aha, I thought: in this way, people who grow up being loved become more loved.

I didn't have any conversation topics I could share with others at all, so he was always the one talking when we were together. I just lent an ear to him, sometimes providing an ill-informed comment if I felt like it. I figured he'd soon be disappointed by my lack of substance and naturally drift away, but as it turns out, we've kept that relationship to this day, even after he graduated college and went far away.

We were meeting for the first time in six months. Emori didn't call and ask my plans or anything so deliberate; he just suddenly showed up at my place. When I opened up the door, he went "Yo" and held up a bag he was carrying. There were two six-packs of beer inside. In every way, things were the same as they were then. In an instant, that six-month blank was filled.

I picked out some snacks at random to go with the drinks, kept my casual wear on, and left in sandals. Emori nodded silently and started walking, so I followed.

He didn’t need to tell me a thing. Our destination was the local children’s park.

It was a desolate park. It was covered in thick weeds, so from a distance it looked like a downright vacant lot. All the play equipment was rusted over, so it felt like just touching it would catch you some mysterious disease. It was our wont to get drunk in that place where childhood dreams died.

The moon was nice that night. The cramped park surrounded by trees had only a single lamp post in front of the swings, and even that wasn’t getting power anymore. But thanks to the moonlight, you could just barely make out the shape of the play equipment.

We pushed aside the bushes to get inside. As if instructed, Emori sat down on a panda, and me on a koala. The benches in the corner were too buried in weeds to be usable, so we were using the animals on springs as chairs. They were horribly unstable and uncomfortable, but it was better than sitting on the ground.

After opening the tabs on our beers, we started drinking without giving a toast or anything. It had probably been some time since he bought it, because the beer was already getting warm. Still, it tasted good drinking it in the open air.

There’s a bit of a story behind why we started drinking in the park. The year before I enrolled, someone at our school died of acute alcoholism. The deceased had been a minor, so local stores became way more strict about checking ID. So we established a practice of Emori buying beer, me providing snacks, and the two of us drinking in the park.

Since we lived in the same apartment building, we really could’ve just drank in either of our rooms, but Emori’s belief was that “beer tastes better the further you are from home.” This led to

us searching for a place within walking distance where we could drink without worrying about onlookers, and that's how we found this park.

"How's it been lately? Anything interesting happen?", Emori asked, clearly not expecting much.

"No. As usual, I'm living like a lonesome old man lives," I replied. "How about you, Emori? Had anything interesting happen?"

He looked up to the night sky, and thought for about 40 seconds.

"A friend of mine got scammed."

"Scammed?"

He nodded. "One of those dating scams, you know. Using romantic feelings to sell off paintings, make you buy apartments, whatever. It's a totally commonplace and boring type of scam, but the testimony my friend gave was kinda interesting."

The victim was a man named Okano, and the scammer was a woman who called herself Ikeda.

Here's how it went. One day, Okano received a message on social media. The sender was a woman named Ikeda, and the message read: "I was your classmate in grade school. I wonder if you remember me?"

He searched his memories, but couldn't recall any girl named Ikeda. Thinking it might be some kind of fraud, he decided to ignore it, and a day later, he got another message. "I'm very sorry for sending a strange message out of the blue. I've been so lonely lately, it's driving me a little nuts. I just got all happy when I found out an old acquaintance lived in the same town, so I went and sent that. There's no need to reply."

That made Okano suddenly uneasy. Maybe he'd just forgotten, and he actually had known a girl named Ikeda. Maybe ignoring her message had hurt her. Maybe he'd pushed a girl grasping at straws out of unbearable loneliness even deeper into the pits.

All this worrying led him to reply to the woman calling herself Ikeda. From there, they started a relationship. Ikeda was a very nice girl, so Okano fell in love before he knew it.

Two months later, he was successfully sold an expensive painting, and the next day, the girl named Ikeda had vanished.

"I should note, this Okano guy isn't brainless," Emori added. "He goes to a pretty good school, and reads lots of books. His mind works fast, and he's more wary than most. And yet, he fell for the oldest trick in the book. Why, do you think?"

"He was too nice, maybe?"

Emori shook his head.

"Because he was lonely."

"Ah." After thinking about it a little, I nodded in agreement.

He went on. "What's really interesting is, even after Ikeda deleted her social media, Okano firmly believed that she really was his classmate in grade school. In his head, he's got actual memories. He's able to recall a past he spent in a classroom with little Ikeda. Regardless of whether such a classmate really existed."

"Do you mean... he might have gotten Mimories implanted without him knowing?"

"Nope. The cost would be too much, which doesn't really fit for a scam."

"Then why?"

"He probably rewrote his own memories subconsciously," Emori said with a laugh. "Memories can get twisted so easily just by

how you feel. You don't need nanobots for it - people alter their memories on a daily basis. Amagai, do you know the Fells Acres case?"

I'd never heard of it.

"To put it simply, it's an model example of how unreliable criminal testimony can be. If you get asked over and over "Did this happen to you?", you start to feel like it really did happen to you. So when Ikeda told Okano over and over "you were my classmate," he started to believe it. Maybe he wanted what she said to be true, and that provided a push that altered his memories. Even though he should've been able to just check a yearbook and see there was no classmate named Ikeda, Okano didn't do that. In other words, he got tricked because he wanted to be tricked."

Emori pulled out a cigarette from his pocket and lit it, then took a deep, satisfied breath. It was the same brand he'd smoked since we met, and its sweet smell started to make me feel the reality of our reunion, however late it was for that.

"Seems classic scams like that are on the rise these days. And lonely young guys are the easiest targets. You might get targeted soon too, Amagai."

"I think I'll be fine."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I never had a single friend when I was a kid. I don't have a single good memory. So even if I did get contacted by some old classmate, I'd have no reason to hope."

But Emori slowly shook his head.

"You're wrong, Amagai. They don't work their way into memories. They work their way into the absence of 'em."

*

In the end, what we brought to the park wasn't enough for us. So afterward, we headed toward the station and went to the pub. There, we talked about pointless junk, then split up at 9.

As I walked through the shopping district alone, another one of those episodes started.

The trigger this time was the song that marked closing time, Auld Lang Syne. Or rather, Japan's version of the same tune: Firefly's Light.

"Well, you're late."

Upon my return to the classroom after club time, Touka spoke to me with a sullen look.

"The meeting went long," I explained. "The third-years this year seem really into it."

"Hmph."

"You could've just left without me."

She looked at me with dissatisfaction.

"Wrong, Chihiro. Here's where you should say "sorry for making you wait.""

"...Sorry for making you wait. And thank you for waiting."

"Good." Touka smiled and grabbed her bag. "Well, let's go home."

We were the last ones left in the classroom. We checked the window locks, switched off the lights, and exited to the hallway. The sharp smell of spray-on deodorant used by the exercise club hit my nose. Touka covered her mouth and lightly coughed. She had a weak throat, so even small stimuli like second-hand smoking or cold

air conditioning could make her cough.

While changing shoes in the entry hall, the song Firefly's Light played to mark the end of the school day, and Touka sung along with her own lyrics.

The brightly shining firefly
Disappears into the dark
So fleeting and so meaningless,
Just like my yearning heart

They were terribly tragic lyrics.

"Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever heard the proper lyrics to that."

"Me neither. I only know there's a part about a firefly's light."

"Which is why I question your decision to make it about heartbreak."

"But you learned it with these lyrics, right, Chihiro?"

"Yeah. Even if I learn the real lyrics someday, whenever the song plays, I'll probably remember your lyrics first, Touka."

"And you'll also remember my face with it, right?"

"Yeah, probably."

I'll probably remember our conversation today too, I thought to myself. As a heartwarming memory.

"I think stuff like this is a kind of curse."

"...What do you mean?"

"Yasunari Kawabata put it like this. "When you say goodbye to a man, teach him the name of a flower. Flowers bloom every year without fail.""

Touka spoke proudly, with a raised index finger.

“For the rest of your life, when you hear Firefly’s Light, you’ll remember the lyrics I made, and me.”

“That certainly is a curse,” I laughed.

“Well, not that I’ll be saying goodbye to you, Chihiro,” she laughed back.

I shook my head to cut the memory short.

In the past few days, I was remembering Touka Natsunagi more and more.

The cause was clear. It was that incident at the shrine.

What in the world had that been?

Her yukata, her flowers, her hair, her stance, her face, everything was the same.

The only difference was her age. My Mimories only defined Touka Natsunagi’s appearance up to age 15, but the one I’d passed by that day looked a fair bit more mature.

It was like the childhood friend of those Mimories had actually grown up just the same as I had, then appeared before my eyes.

Let’s think about this. A basic principle of Mimories is that it’s forbidden to model the characters in them after real people. That’s to avoid any problems that might result from the mixing of reality and Mimories. So right out of the gate, I could reject the theory that Touka Natsunagi was based on the woman I saw. And nonsense like her being Touka Natsunagi herself wasn’t even worth considering.

Dismissing it as an accidental resemblance wasn’t impossible, I suppose. A lot of people had come from outside the prefecture that day to visit the festival. It’s not a zero percent chance there had been a woman mixed in there who looked just like Touka Natsunagi. Even the yukata and the flowers, if you think about it,

weren't uncommon designs.

But then how would I explain her reaction? When we made eye contact, she seemed just as shaken as me, if not moreso. Her look said "this can't possibly be right, it must be some mistake." And she was trying to push through the crowd toward me. Could I dismiss that as a case of mistaken identity? I happened to know someone who looked a lot like her, and she happened to know someone who looked a lot like me. Do coincidences that extreme even happen?

There's a simpler explanation. The woman I passed by was a summer illusion, born of alcohol, loneliness, and the hot festival air. Besides the part where I had to doubt my own sanity, this was a perfect theory.

No, maybe I don't need to think so hard about it in the first place. Whether mistaken identity or a hallucination, there was ultimately only one measure I should take.

To erase the Mimories.

If I did that, I'd no longer mistake someone for her or have hallucinations of her.

And my mind would stop being frequently tormented by recalling memories that didn't even exist.

I arrived at my room. I took out one of the two Lethe packages I'd put away in the closet. Not the one for erasing my childhood memories, but the one for erasing memories of Touka Natsunagi. I filled a glass with water, and put it on a table next to the Lethe.

I was ready. All I had to do now was tear open the package, pour the contents into the water, and drink.

I reached out my hand.

My fingers trembled.

It’s not like it’s accompanied by pain. It’s not as if it’s intensely bitter. You don’t lose consciousness or anything. What did I need to be afraid of? It was just erasing those mistakenly-inserted memories, bringing me back to normal. Lethe is perfectly well-tested and safe.

Most importantly, even if something went wrong, it’s not like *you* have any memories to worry about losing.

I grabbed the package.

A cold sweat ran down from my armpits.

Maybe it’s a mistake to try and overcome a physiological fear with rationality. I should change my thinking. I just have to empty my head for about ten seconds. In that time, everything will end. I don’t need to make myself accept it 100%. Jump in irresponsibly without thinking, and leave the cleanup to future you. Become empty. That’s what you’re best at, right?

But the more I tried to empty my head, thoughts instead filled those gaps. Like trying to clean a lens with a fingerprint on it and making it more smudged, the situation only got worse.

For a long while, I continued to wonder to myself.

Suddenly, I had a thought. This is the wrong place.

This room is still thick with the raw fear I felt that day. The floor, the wallpaper, the ceiling, the bed, the curtains, everything was stained with my fear. Like an old building caked in nicotine.

There’s a proper place for everything. I needed to prepare a suitable setting for drinking Lethe. What would be ideal for that?

The answer came quickly.

*

The next day, after my part-time job, I took the bus across from my apartment. In my pocket was the Lethe for erasing my memories of Touka Natsunagi. As the air conditioning blew on me a little too coldly, I took the package out and aimlessly inspected it from various angles.

Before long, the bus reached its destination, so I put the Lethe in my pocket and got off. Past the bus stop was the shrine.

I went through the torii, entering into the shrine grounds. In stark contrast to the night of the festival, I didn't see a single person. Evening cicadas mistook the cloudy sky for dusk and were buzzing all over.

I bought mineral water from a vending machine and sat down on the stone steps. After touching my pocket to check for the Lethe, I started by lighting a cigarette to calm myself.

Right as I finished and stomped the cigarette out with my shoe, I heard an ambulance in the distance. By the time I realized that would be bad, it was already too late. Triggered by the sound of the siren, I was sucked into the whirlpool of memory.

I hadn't seen Touka in pajamas for a long time. We used to regularly visit each other's houses and stay the night, so I saw her in pajamas and with messy hair enough to get tired of it. But starting around age 11, we came to refrain from excess interference, so holes began to open up in our knowledge of each other.

That day I saw her in pajamas for the first time in a year, she looked extremely frail. I'm sure the thin white fabric of the plain pajamas didn't help, but her neck and her skinny arms looked like they could be easily broken if you were even a little rough.

I looked at my own limbs to confirm the disparity. Until

recently, we'd been about the same height, but at some point I'd grown about 10 centimeters taller than her. As such, whenever we held hands or leaned on each other, we were made aware of the height difference, like it or not. Her thin legs and slim back made me keenly aware that our bodies were headed in very different directions.

That realization made me, at least, uncomfortable. Even if the contents don't change, if you change the shape of a container, that also changes what it means. We're having the same sort of exchange as usual, but I feel some things too much, and other things too little. If we change our behavior to match those sensations, that results in its own kind of awkwardness.

Seeing Touka in her pajamas that day also made me somehow restless. For a while after I entered the hospital room to pay her a visit, I couldn't quite look her in the eye. Until my nerves loosened, I feigned interest in the room interior and the gifts she'd gotten to avoid her gaze.

Of course, I didn't find anything especially interesting there. It was an ordinary hospital room. White wallpaper, faded curtains, light-green linoleum floors, a simple bed. The room could hold four, but there were no patients other than Touka. She was given the bed in the back on the right, which got the best sunlight.

"The doctor thinks it might be changes in air pressure."

She glanced out the window as if to check the weather.

"I mean, that typhoon was approaching, right? Apparently that made the pressure drop fast, so I had that attack."

I remembered the incident from yesterday.

I found Touka collapsed after 4 PM. Normally around that time, she would be bringing her homework up to my room, but she

didn't show up that day. I had a bad feeling and went to check the opposite room, where I found her crouched on the floor, unable to move. She had symptoms of cyanosis, and you could tell it was an asthma attack at a glance. There was an inhaler on the floor nearby, but it seemed like the medicine was hardly having any effect. Hearing her gasping more roughly than I'd ever heard before, I immediately ran to the living room to call an ambulance.

They said it was a major attack that put her on the verge of respiratory failure.

"Does it not hurt to breathe anymore?", I asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine now. They just put me in the hospital to look at me in case I have another attack, so I'm not feeling bad or anything."

She was acting cheerful, but her voice was so timid and weak. Was it really okay for her to be talking? Maybe she was pushing herself to do it because I was around. But if I tried to ask her about that, she'd just demand a more believable performance from her body.

At least so she wouldn't strain her voice, I moved the chair as close to the bed as possible and made sure to speak in a quiet voice myself.

"I really thought you might die this time."

"I thought I would too," Touka laughed as if we weren't even talking about her. "But if you had acted any slower then, Chihiro, things would've been much worse. The doctor was complimenting you. Saying how calling an ambulance right away was some decisive judgement."

I put it bluntly. "It's because I'm used to you having attacks, Touka."

“You saved me. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

There was a short silence.

I resolutely decided to ask something.

“...Can that be cured?”

She pursed her lips, and her head fell to the side.

“I dunno. Lots of people grow out of it, apparently, but some people still have it as grown-ups.”

“Huh.”

“But I gotta say...” She intentionally changed the subject. “Chihiro, you sure knew a lot about whistling wheezing and retracted breathing. You’re like a doctor.”

“I just happened to read about it.”

“No, you looked it up for my sake, right?”

She tilted her head to look up at me from below.

Her long hair swayed in accordance with that motion.

“Yeah. Since it’d be bad if you died in front of me.”

“Ahaha. I guess that’s true.”

She laughed with a concerned look.

Maybe I worded that a little too coldly, I silently regretted.

“But anyway, it’s been a long time since you carried me all baby-like,” Touka said jokingly. “You lifted me up just like that. I was surprised.”

“I couldn’t think of any other way to do it.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. If you’ll do that every time, then maybe asthma attacks aren’t so bad.”

I lightly prodded Touka as she teased me. She went “ouch!” and overdramatically held her head.

“Don’t do that ever again. I was so worried, I thought I might

stop breathing too."

There was a strange pause. Touka looked at me with her mouth open, caught off-guard. That expression, though slowly, turned into a ticklish smile.

"Sorry, sorry. I'll rephrase it," she corrected. "I don't like asthma attacks. I was just happy to feel your touch, Chihiro."

"Well, then get better quick."

"Right," she nodded. "Sorry for worrying you."

"It's fine," I curtly replied. Now, I was getting embarrassed about what I said, and could feel my face heating up.

A cold feeling on my neck brought me back to my senses. When I touched it with my fingers, it was slightly wet. Soon after, I noticed small dark stains dotting the stone steps. A strong wind was blowing through the area.

It had started to rain.

It felt like I'd been saved. There was no way I'd use the Lethe in the middle of this storm.

I'd gotten an excuse to return home without doing anything.

I put my hands on my knees and stood up, then descended the steps. My gait was light from relief.

I'll return to my apartment for now. I can think about other things later.

Today wasn't a good day for erasing memories.

The rain was still going strong while I waited for the bus. I kept out of the rain under the overhang of a shop near the bus stop, then got on the bus when it arrived five minutes later. The interior was full of a musty air from the AC thanks to the firmly shut windows, and the floor was made wet here and there from the

rainwater dripping off passengers' umbrellas.

I took a seat near the back on the right side, and drew a sigh of relief. Then I casually glanced over to the bus stop on the other side of the street. It seems there was also a festival somewhere today. A girl wearing a yukata was gloomily looking up at the clouds. Maybe she was thinking stuff like, how long will this rain go on? And in my brand new yukata... Talk about unlucky... Hope they don't cancel the festival.

The bus started to move.

"Now you've done it," someone said.

You overlooked one hell of a thing, y'know.

I wiped the fog off the glass window and looked at that girl in the yukata again.

Black hair ran down to her shoulder blades.

She wore a deep blue, fireworks-patterned yukata.

With attention-grabbing pale skin.

And red chrysanthemums in her hair.

My finger was unconsciously pushing the disembark button.

The five minutes until the next stop felt like an eternity.

Once I got off the bus, I ran as fast as I could to the previous bus stop. For the time being, I swallowed down the ceaseless questions that came to mind, and dashed through the heavy rain. People walking by turned to look at me wondering what was up, but I didn't have time to worry about them.

As I ran so fast my lungs felt ready to burst, I was meanwhile thinking at a leisurely pace. When was the last time I ran for my life like this? At the very least since I entered college, there had been no reason to. Maybe I did it for a class in high school. No, I don't think there were foot races in high school, were there? Even for

baseball games, even for long-distance runs, even for fitness tests, I didn't give it my all so as to not get too exhausted. Which means I might have to go back as far as middle school. Any memory of running for my life...

Sure enough, the first to come to mind was a false memory. A Mimory from the track meet in my third year of middle school.

I had been depressed for about a week before the event. Not because I wasn't athletic. Rather, the fact I was half-decent caused a catastrophe. By some mistake, I was chosen over a classmate in the track and field club as the anchor for the 800-meter relay. I'd never even imagined I'd be given such an important role in, of all things, my last track meet of middle school. I wanted to escape, but I lacked the courage to refuse the majority vote. That said, I also wasn't able to buckle down and prepare myself, so the day arrived while I was still hesitating.

Normally, I would never moan and groan in front of Touka, but if I was going to do it any day, it was that one. It happened while we were in class. To tell the truth, I want to head back home right now; I'm being crushed by the pressure of potentially ruining my classmates' memories. That's what I told her.

Then Touka playfully hit my shoulder, and innocently told me:

"Who cares about your classmates? If you want to run for someone, just run for me."

What with the serious asthma she'd had all her life, she'd never once run as fast as she could. She always just watched in PE classes, and hardly ever attended any physically-demanding events like hikes or ski lessons. And in this track meet, while she would be attending, it wasn't as a participant. She herself refused to be

chosen, not wanting to cause any bother.

When the line “just run for me” came out of her mouth, it felt like it carried a very special meaning. Not only that, it didn’t feel pressuring at all.

Yeah. What was I even afraid of? Touka is what’s most important to me. And Touka won’t be disappointed with me regardless of how my running turns out. In fact, she’ll surely praise me no matter what.

A weight was lifted off my shoulders.

In the relay that day, I passed my two opponents and came in first. And then, while heading back to my classmates, I collapsed and was taken to the infirmary. I remember lying in the bed while Touka sat beside me going “that was so cool” over and over. But my senses were fading after the bodily exhaustion and being freed from the intense pressure, so I quickly fell asleep. (This might possibly be when the so-called “third kiss” occurred.)

By the time I woke up, the closing ceremony was long over. It was dark outside, and Touka stood beside the bed, looking down at my face.

“Time to go home?”, she said with a smile.

I returned to reality.

Yeesh, you really don’t have a life of your own, I thought, thoroughly disappointed with myself.

At this rate, my life flashing before my eyes could easily be made up of nothing but fictional memories.

I saw a deep blue yukata. At the same time, I saw a bus approaching the bus stop. I wrung out the last of my energy to race toward her. I’d basically never exercised since starting college, and I

smoked a pack a day, so my lungs, heart, and legs were pushing their limits. The corners of my vision were hazy from a lack of oxygen, and my throat made a sound hard to imagine as my own breathing.

Ordinarily, I probably would've never made it. But seeing me running up soaking wet without an umbrella, the driver seemed to have waited a little bit to depart.

Thankfully, I managed to get on the bus, but I didn't speak to her right away. I grabbed the handrail, and leaned on it while catching my breath. Rainwater trickled down from my hair to the floor. My heart was pounding like a construction site. Even though my body was soaked, it felt hot, like my blood cells were boiling. My legs trembled and could hardly keep me up, so I nearly fell every time the bus jolted.

Finally, once I caught my breath, I looked up.

Of course, she was still there.

She sat in a seat one before the very back, looking out the window listlessly.

My calmed heart was again thrown into disorder.

I headed straight for her.

Maybe because of the brain chemicals secreted while I ran, I felt like I would be able to fearlessly speak to her now.

I hadn't decided what to talk about. But I was convinced it all would work out. Once I got a word in, the rest would surely follow naturally.

I had that, at least.

Stopping right beside her, I grabbed the railing.

I took a quick deep breath.

"Um."

That word was all it took.

The summer magic was broken in an instant.

The woman looking out the window turned around.

“...What is it?”

She stared at me dubiously.

And she didn’t look anything like her.

She was only arguably similar in physique and hair, and in all other areas, she wasn’t remotely like Touka Natsunagi. Almost like someone had known I would jump to conclusions and deviously placed her there as a trap.

The more I looked at her, the less she looked like Touka. I didn’t feel a shred of the delicacy and grace that woman I saw at the shrine had.

How had I mixed this woman up with her?

“Er, do you need something?”

The false Touka questioned me again with a look of wariness. I realized I’d been rudely looking over her face for quite a while.

Calm down, I told myself. This woman hasn’t done anything wrong. Just happening to be dressed like the childhood friend in my Mimories, that’s no error at all; it was just me who mistook her.

Yes, I’m the one at fault. I know that. And even so, I felt an intense anger. I couldn’t even believe how furious I was. I felt like a black mucus was spreading through my chest. It’s possible I’d never been so angry at anyone in my life.

My grip on the handrail tightened. My mind was thinking up one insult after another. How dare you give me false hope; don’t dress so misleadingly; a woman like you shouldn’t be allowed to dress like that; you don’t even measure up to Touka Natsunagi’s ankles; etcetera.

Of course, I didn't speak any of them. I politely apologized for having the wrong person, then got off at the next stop to escape. And I mindlessly walked through the rain.

While taking shelter from the storm in a pub and drowning myself in cheap beer, I had a thought.

I'll admit it.

I'm in love with Touka Natsunagi.

And I long to meet her, to the point that I'd see traces of her in a total stranger who was just dressed similarly.

But so what, I ask? A Mimory engineer designed Touka Natsunagi as a person so matched to my tastes, I had no choice but to fall in love with her. That's all it was. It's no different from having a tailored suit fitted for your body. It would be stranger if I didn't love her.

Admitting that made me feel a little better.

Because I felt better, I could down beer more comfortably.

And sure enough, I drank too much.

In the process of vomiting up everything I'd ate into the toilet, continuing to throw up gastric juices, returning to my seat, taking a drink, falling down on the table, and going back to the bathroom to vomit, closing time came, and I was thrown out of the pub. I squatted outside for a while, but I knew my nausea and headache wouldn't get better anytime soon, so I emptied my head and started to walk. The last train had left a little while ago, and I didn't have cash for a taxi. It was bound to be a long night.

I heard Firefly's Light playing from a nearby store, and I unconsciously hummed Touka's custom lyrics.

The brightly shining firefly

Disappears into the dark
So fleeting and so meaningless,
Just like my yearning heart

Tomorrow, I thought, I'll take the Lethe.
Because it's just empty being in love with a non-existent girl.

*

Of course, being in love with an existing girl is empty in its own way.

In a sense, I'm a person who doesn't exist too. Nearly all the girls I've ever met probably never saw me as a potential romantic partner. Heck, most might not even remember my name.

It was a problem more fundamental than being liked or disliked. I wasn't even a part of their universe. Maybe we existed in the same space and time, but we never crossed. I was no more than a passing shadow to them, and vice versa.

It's empty for an existing person to love a non-existent person, but it's equally empty for a non-existent person to love an existing person. And a non-existent person loving a non-existent person, that's just complete nothingness.

Love is something that can only happen between people who exist.

*

The sky was brightening by the time I reached my apartment.

I vowed to myself I'd never drink again, but at the same time

figured I wouldn't learn and would be drinking again in two days' time. The guy happily drinking away and the guy with the hangover are like different people, so lessons learned by one won't apply to the other. One me learns only the joy of drinking, while the other learns its bitterness.

There was no sign of people in the residential area this early in the morning. A stray cat living behind a local snack stand casually crossed my path. Usually it would run off as soon as it saw me, but perhaps recognizing my weakened state, it showed no hints of caution today. A crow somewhere let out a single caw, and as if in response, a turtle dove elsewhere chirped a single measure.

I stumbled my way up the stairs and reached my door. I dug through my pocket for my keys, and found my room key among them. That simple task took considerable concentration. With enough struggle as to make it seem like I was cracking a safe, I opened the door.

The moment I put my hand on the doorknob, the door to room 202 opened, and its resident peeked out. I looked toward my neighbor in the midst of opening the door. I had no idea who lived next to me, so I thought I'd just see what they looked like.

It was a girl. She looked anywhere from 17 to 20. She was dressed like she'd just recently gone out to buy a soft drink. Her limbs, faintly lit, were like a transparent white, and her long, soft black hair was blown up by the wind in the hall,

and like it did that day, time stopped.

An invisible nail fixed us in place, myself in the pose of opening my door, and her closing her door with the back of her hand.

There was no deep blue yukata, nor red chrysanthemums in her hair.

And yet, I knew it.

As if we temporarily lost the concept of words, we looked at each other for a long time.

The first thing to resume movement was her mouth.

“...Chihiro?”

She spoke my name.

“...Touka?”

I spoke hers.

I had a childhood friend who I’d never met. I’d never seen her face. I’d never heard her speak. I’d never even touched her. Despite that, I knew the darling features of her face. I knew the softness of her voice. I knew the warmth in her palms.

The summer magic was still in effect.

Chapter 3: Partial Recall

It's said that memory-altering nanotechnology was hastily developed 15 years ago in an attempt to tackle a sudden outbreak of New Alzheimer's cases worldwide. The technology's original intention of repairing and preserving memories has gradually shifted in the direction of creating fictional memories.

It would appear, ultimately, that those who wanted to get their past back were far outnumbered by those who wanted to redo it. Even if the memories would be no more than forgeries.

"The past cannot be changed, but the future can be" - with the progression of memory-altering technology, that way of thinking has been dying out.

Who really knows about the future. But the past can be changed.

Early on, the fictional memories written by the nanobots were commonly called things like "Shamories" or "Pseudories." But in recent years, Mimories has become the norm. As far as the name goes, there's still no ambiguity that they're only "mimicking" real memories, but it seems to have been a move away from those negatively-nuanced words like "sham" and "pseudo." In accordance with this, the people who appear within Mimories have come to be called Substites. These terms are meant to reinforce the notion that they serve the same purpose as an artificial arm or tooth: simply filling in for something you lack.

But of course, what qualifies as "missing something" is up for debate. If you twist things enough, you could deem the vast majority of humanity to be patients in dire need of treatment for their imperfect life experiences. Because a person who isn't missing

anything at all can't possibly exist.

At any rate, though, there's no denying Mimories have been a beneficial thing for humanity. When people are put in mental distress by experiences of loss, or being victim to a crime, or ill treatment, using fictional memories to guide the patient through a reconstruction or erasing the experiences themselves is, needless to say, an effective cure. One study showed that when Mimories from Great Mother were implanted in children with bad manners or attitude problems, nearly 40% of subjects demonstrated positive changes. In another experiment, Spiritual was given to a drug addict who had repeatedly attempted suicide, and it was as if he was reborn into a pious and abstinent person. (At that point, it seems a little blasphemous.)

At the present time, it's hard to really feel the blessings Mimories have had on society, but that's because users of these memory-altering nanobots dislike publicly talking about that fact. The position it holds is most similar to that of cosmetic surgery. And in fact, there are people who derisively refer to memory alteration as "memory plastic surgery."

People can't choose the life they're born into. That's why they need relief in the form of Mimories, proponents for memory alteration claim. I may have an aversion to Mimories, but I feel what these people say makes sense. It seems to me as if the majority of deniers reject Mimories not due to philosophical concerns, but merely out of physiological uneasiness.

Back to the critical concern, however: they still have yet to discover a way to restore memories lost via New Alzheimer's. There exist memory recovery nanobots called Memento, but these only have the ability to partially restore memories erased with Lethe,

having no effectiveness whatsoever on memories New Alzheimer's has taken.

The technique of using Mimories like backups was considered, but that didn't go well either. Even if you write back Mimories with the same contents as the forgotten memories, it seems they won't properly establish themselves in the brain. On the other hand, when you insert Mimories that differ from reality, those stick around for a relatively long time. What we can surmise from this is that New Alzheimer's isn't a disease that destroys memories, it's a disease that unravels the combinations of memory. One would presume that some memories are easy to unravel, while others aren't. Maybe the reason episodic memory is the most commonly lost is because those memories have the most composite nature of them all.

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For a while after waking up, I wasn't able to remember anything.

I had regularly stolen beer from my father's stash ever since I was 15, and yet today was the first time I ever experienced having a gap in my memory. For a moment, I was flustered, wondering if I really had lost some memories from drinking too much. I had heard about such experiences many times, but I thought it was just an exaggeration or something, or a means of excusing your disgraceful behavior at the bar.

Where is this, is it morning or night, when did I get in bed, why do I have a splitting headache - I didn't have a single idea. I was just barely able to put together that it was alcohol to blame thanks to

the smell of it rising from the depths of my stomach.

I closed my eyes. Let's just take it slow, and remember things one at a time. Where is this? It's my room. Is it morning or night? Based on the brightness of the sunlight shining through the curtains, morning. When did I get in bed? There, my thoughts stalled out. Can't rush this. What's my last memory? I remember being kicked out of the pub after getting blackout drunk, missing the train, and walking to my apartment. Why did I feel the need to get blackout drunk? Right, because of that case of mistaken identity. I mistook the woman in a deep blue yukata standing at the bus stop for Touka Natsunagi. I was so miserable, I went to the pub to drown my sorrows.

The points started to come together. After getting kicked out of the pub and walking more than 3 hours, I finally arrived at the apartment. (The moment I become aware of this, the muscles in my legs start to ache.) After struggling to unlock the door and tumbling into my room, I had a strange dream. That mistaken identity incident must have had a resounding effect, because the dream had Touka Natsunagi in it. I dreamt Touka Natsunagi moved into the room next door.

The dream continued on from reality, beginning from when I arrived home. I snapped at her like "why are you here, you're a person who shouldn't exist," and she looked at me quizzically.

"Chihiro, is it possible you're drunk?"

"Just answer my question." I tried to approach her and stumbled. I managed to get my hand on the wall and avoided falling over, but possibly because the blood had gone to my head, or because the smell wafting through my door was making my body slacken, my vision was spinning and I couldn't stand up straight. I

had no conception of what way I was standing right now.

Touka Natsunagi spoke with concern.

“Are you okay? Do you need a shoulder?”

I don’t remember much past that.

I do feel like she courteously nursed me.

In any event, all of this was unquestionably a dream shown to me by my alcohol-addled brain. My mind and body were too weak to stay in control. I’d never had a dream so directly answer to my desires before.

It’s like a fantasy a grade-schooler would have in bed, I thought. The girl I like moves in next door and looks after me when I’m feeling weak.

No doubt about it, it’s not the sort of dream a grown man should be having.

I had decided yesterday that I was going to change my pathetic self.

Today, I’m going to drink the Lethe.

I crawled out of bed, and with my face scrunching up from a dull headache, drank three cups of water. It spilled out the sides of my mouth and dripped down my neck. I tore off my bad-smelling clothes and took a lengthy shower. I dried my hair, brushed my teeth, drank another two cups of water, then lay down in bed. While doing all that, I started to feel considerably better. My head was still pounding and I felt nauseous, but the sense that I’d already cleared the peak put me at ease. Then I fell into a light sleep.

I woke up after about an hour. Likely out of hunger, my stomach felt like it was being strangled. Come to think of it, I had thrown up everything I ate last night. I didn’t like it, but I was going to have to eat something soon.

I slowly got out of bed, went to the kitchen, and peered under the sink. There wasn't even a single one of those cup ramens I thought I'd bought on sale at the local supermarket. I twisted my neck. I seemed to remember having at least five or so left. I must've been extremely forgetful lately, no thanks to my drinking.

I checked the freezer to see if there was even any bread, but there were only two things inside: gin and ice packs. I even looked under the ice maker, but found nothing besides ice fragments.

I didn't have any hopes in the refrigerator to begin with. Since about six months ago, it had been repurposed into nothing more than a beer cooler. I couldn't be bothered to cook for myself, so I'd stopped buying anything but cup ramen, bento boxes, and frozen food.

Even so, maybe it could have a snack or something.

Counting on a single ray of hope, I opened the door.

There was a foreign presence there.

A lettuce and tomato salad on a plate, neatly wrapped up, and accompanied by a handwritten note:

"You should really be eating better."

*

The first part-time job I took in my pursuit of buying Lethe was at a gas station. I was fired in a month, so after that I worked at a restaurant. I was fired in a month there, too. Both cases were due to a lack of sociability. If I had to say, it was my interactions with co-workers that were the issue, not customers. They didn't seem to care for my attitude of "as long as I'm doing my job, what's the problem?"

I learned that I wasn't suited for jobs where I kept meeting with the same people, so for a while I took day jobs introduced to me by university cooperatives. But this had its own problems, as it was annoying having to build a relationship with a new person from scratch every time. What one might lump together as "communication ability" can be separately considered the ability to construct human relationships and the ability to preserve them, but I didn't seem to have these in equal measure.

I pondered if there was any work where I could avoid the troubles of human interaction, and just then happened to spot a help-wanted poster for a local video rental store. I tried applying, and was accepted without an interview. I guess there were no other applicants.

Uncommon for video rental stores these days, it was a small independent business. It looked worn-out on the inside and the outside, as if it might crumble any second. But thanks to a fair number of curious regulars, it was apparently getting on okay. Or maybe it was being run by a decently well-off person just as a hobby, so profits were irrelevant. The manager was a quiet and short man over 70, always with a cigarette in his mouth.

Customers rarely came. That was to be expected. These days, video rental stores were only used by the elderly or certain types of nerd. And how many people even still owned those relics known as VCRs? A young person might come to visit once or twice a month, and even most of those were just window shopping.

All the customers were docile, so it was a really easy job. You might say my most important job was keeping myself awake. It didn't pay much, but for someone who wasn't hoping for companionship or worthwhileness or skill development, it was

more or less the ideal occupation.

I saved up enough money to buy Lethe after two months there, but I knew that leaving myself free time would just make it into more time spent drinking, so I continued to work there. It was simply comfortable, for one thing. That shabby place left behind by the times was strangely relaxing for my mind. I can't express it very well, but it felt almost harmonious, like this was a place that accepted my existence. Questionable as it is that I found a place for myself there, of all things.

There had been no customers today, as usual. I stood at the register and bit down a yawn as I thought about what I'd found in my refrigerator this morning.

A homemade salad, accompanied by a handwritten note.

If we considered the occurrence last night to be a dream, that would make the food and the note my doing, while blackout drunk. In other words, while drunk to the point of having no recollection of my actions, I threw up until my stomach was empty, spent 3 hours and change walking home to my apartment, then produced lettuce, tomato, and onion from somewhere to put together a salad, neatly wrapped it up and put it in the fridge, washed and cleaned up the cookware I used, left behind a note to my future self with cute girly handwriting, fell asleep, and then forgot all of this.

And if it wasn't a dream, that would mean the food and the note were put there by Touka Natsunagi. Which is to say, the memories I thought were Mimories were real, I really had a childhood friend named Touka Natsunagi, she happened to move into the room next to mine, and when I drunkenly collapsed, she gallantly nursed me and even made some breakfast for me.

Both theories were equally ridiculous.

Isn't there a more realistic explanation here?

After some thought, I arrived at a third possibility.

I remembered what Emori had told me two days ago, about the scammer who pretended to be an old acquaintance to achieve her objective.

"Seems classic scams like that are on the rise these days. And lonely young guys are the easiest targets. You might get targeted soon too, Amagai."

What if somehow, the details of my Mimories leaked out from the clinic in some form?

What if that information got into the hands of a third party with malicious intentions?

Compared to the dream theory and the reality theory, this one had a slight ring of truth. The scam theory. The woman I met last night who's the spitting image of Touka Natsunagi is just a fake prepared by some fraudulent organization, nothing more than a stranger playing the part of the Substite named Touka Natsunagi.

Of course, this theory had its own holes. Many, in fact, and big ones. If a character from your Mimories appeared to you in reality, you wouldn't just be happy about it - anyone would find it immediately suspicious. You'd be wary, knowing that can't possibly happen, so maybe someone's trying to ensnare you. The other party would have to realize that much. It's one thing to disguise yourself as a real acquaintance, but I can't think of any merit to disguising yourself as a character from their Mimories. It's like telling me to suspect you.

No, maybe I'm underestimating the power of people's latent desires. Didn't Emori say that Okano, the man who fell for the scam,

was told “you were my classmate” again and again, so he started to believe it?

Emori supposed that his desire for what she said to be the truth resulted in his memories themselves being altered. If that sort of mental inclination is common, then yes, maybe a Substite is even more suitable for this kind of scam than a real acquaintance. Substites are carefully designed by Mimory engineers to fill in all the mental gaps revealed by the program’s deep analysis, so you could consider them big lumps of that person’s inner desires. How many people could be calm and look at themselves objectively when faced with the partner of their dreams?

In that sense, there’s no easier target for a scammer than someone who has Mimories. Hadn’t Emori said that, too? “They don’t work their way into memories. They work their way into the absence of ’em.”

Even so, many doubts remained. Supposing the woman I met yesterday was a scammer presenting herself as Touka Natsunagi, would she really go so far as to move in next door just to trap a mere student like myself? Not only that, was it that easy to find someone who was an exact match for a Substite? That she would’ve gotten plastic surgery just to trick me was inconceivable.

My thoughts hit a dead end there. There’s too little to go on right now. It’d be hasty to come to a conclusion right this second. When I go back to the apartment, before anything else, I’ll visit the room next door. And I’ll ask her to her face. Who in the world are you? I doubt she’ll answer honestly, but it should give me at least a clue. I might grasp a lead that lets me guess at her strategy.

And if it comes to light that she really is some kind of scammer...

I don’t think I’ll be satisfied unless I can make her pay for it a little.

*

After work, I visited the supermarket near the train station and bought a bunch of cup ramen. I wanted to get back to the apartment ASAP, so I didn’t even glance at any other food. Looking at the bag full of junk food, I had a tinge of worry that if I kept up these eating habits, my body would fall apart eventually. But thinking in terms of “what good would healthy living actually do for a person like me?”, it all ceased to matter.

There was another reason for my unhealthy diet. Once I passed 18 or so, I stopped finding anything tasty. It’s not like my taste buds were numbed. I think it’s most accurate to say that the taste information and the reward system were split apart. Now, two years later, I can no longer remember what sort of feeling “delicious” was. If it was food that was salty and heated, the rest didn’t matter.

I haven’t had a doctor check me, so I don’t know what the cause is. It could be psychosomatic, it could be a lack of nutrition. Or maybe there’s a blood clot or a tumor somewhere in my brain. For the time being, it wasn’t a major inconvenience, so I was ignoring it.

I was never especially picky with food to begin with. My mother had no interest in food, and as far as I knew, never cooked a single meal in the kitchen. With some exceptions like cooking practice and outdoors school, I might as well have never eaten something I made myself. Since I was a kid, I always got meals in the

form of premade bentos or fast food.

Possibly in response to that past of mine, my Mimories contained a number of episodes where I was fed homemade cuisine my childhood friend made. Mimories where Touka observed that all the things I ate were bad for me, worried that “you should really be eating better,” and invited me to her house to treat me to her cooking.

I suddenly realized a certain coincidence. Come to think of it, the note left in the fridge had used the exact same phrase: “You should really be eating better.” Letter for letter.

Sure enough, that woman knows the contents of my Mimories. I braced myself once more, remembering that I had to be cautious. She knew exactly what kind of strategy would effectively deceive me. She has all the resources she needs to captivate me.

However - I repeated it to myself again and again - the woman named Touka Natsunagi doesn’t exist.

I can’t let myself be fooled.

I arrived at the apartment.

Standing in front of the door to room 202, I pushed the doorbell.

After ten seconds, there was still no response.

I pushed it again to be sure, but the result was the same.

If she was a scammer, she should’ve been anticipating my visit.

Since that implies she wouldn’t be away, why else would she not answer?

Does she hope to lower my decision-making faculties by making me get antsy? Or maybe there’s some sort of preparation needed for the scam.

I couldn’t just stand there forever, so I decided to go back to my room for now.

When I noticed the door wasn’t locked, I wasn’t surprised. Me forgetting to lock my room was a common occurrence.

Even when I noticed the lights were on, I still wasn’t surprised. Me leaving the lights on was also a common occurrence.

Even when I realized there was a girl in an apron standing in the kitchen, I still wasn’t surprised. A girl wearing an apron working in the kitchen for me was a common occurrence...

In my Mimories, that is.

The shopping bag slipped out of my hand, and the cup ramen spilled out in the entryway.

Hearing the sound, the girl turned to face me.

“Oh, welcome home, Chihiro.” Her face widened into a smile. “How are you feeling?”

When I confronted this suspicious woman who had entered into my room without permission and was using my kitchen like she owned the place, my first thought wasn’t “I’ll call the police” nor “I’ll hold her down” nor “I’ll call for someone,” but “did I leave anything lying around that I don’t want a girl to see?”

I know, even I thought I was being absurd.

But standing in front of me was a girl being even more absurd than that.

Even though the room’s owner had appeared, she didn’t attempt to run away or even explain herself, and just cheerfully sampled the contents of a pot. Ingredients that she appeared to have brought were laid out on the counter.

From the smell, it seemed she was making some meat and

potato stew.

Just the sort of meal a fictional childhood friend would make, I suppose.

“...What are you doing?”

At length, I was able to ask that. Then it occurred to me, that was a meaningless question. She’s trespassing and making food. Just what it looked like.

“I was making meat and potato stew,” she replied, keeping an eye on the pot. “You like meat and potato stew, right, Chihiro?”

“How did you get in my room?”

This was also a question with an obvious answer. She probably stole the spare key while she was nursing me last night. Being that the things in my room were kept to a minimum, she should’ve found it easily with some searching.

She didn’t answer my second question.

“Your laundry was piling up, so I washed it all. Also, you need to air out your futon more regularly.”

I looked out toward the veranda to see a week’s worth of laundry blowing in the breeze.

I felt dizzy.

“Who... are you?”

She stared at me.

“It’s not like you’re drunk this time, are you?”

“Answer me,” I said, taking a harsher tone. “Who are you?”

“Who...? I’m Touka. Did you forget your childhood friend’s face?”

“I don’t have a childhood friend.”

“Then why do you know my name?” She wore a smile mixed with concern. “You called me Touka last night, didn’t you?”

I shook my head. If I let her carry me away like this, it would be all over.

I took a deep breath, and spoke resolutely.

“Touka Natsunagi is a Substite. A fictional person who only exists in my head. I can at least distinguish between reality and fiction. I don’t know if you’re some kind of scammer or what, but trying to mislead me is futile. If you don’t want me to call the police on you, then get out.”

A sigh came out of her slightly-opened mouth.

“...Huh.”

She turned off the flame on the gas stove and walked toward me.

I unconsciously stepped back, and she stepped forward and spoke.

“So you’re still like that, huh?”

I wasn’t able to ask what she meant by that.

My chest was full to bursting, so I wasn’t able to get out words.

As much as I tried to fight for what intentions appeared on the surface, my brain was, on a more fundamental level, seeing the illusion of “a reunion with a beloved childhood friend who I was separated from five years ago,” and trembling with joy.

She was lovely, so lovely, that if I let my guard down, I’d hug her in a heartbeat.

I wasn’t even able to avert my eyes, so she and I looked at each other head-on.

Seeing her face up close, it felt somehow unrealistic. Her skin was almost artificially white, but was faintly red around her eyes, giving me a sickly impression.

It’s like she’s a ghost, I thought.

Seeing me frozen up, she smiled softly.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to push yourself to remember. Just remember this.”

She took my hand and gently put hers around it.

They were cold.

“I’m on your side, Chihiro. No matter what.”

*

After I wrapped up work the next day, I called Emori. I asked if we could meet tonight so I could discuss something with him, and he told me he was free after 10. After deciding to meet up at the park, I hung up. And then I noticed, in the list of contacts on my phone, the name “Touka Natsunagi” had gotten there at some point. She must’ve went and added herself after she nursed me. I thought of deleting it, but figured it could prove useful for something or another, so I kept it there.

I went to school and studied at a table in the corner of the cafeteria, waiting for the appointed time. Once every hour, I walked outside the campus and had a relaxing smoke. The air was horribly humid, so the cigarettes had a cruder taste than usual. Once the cafeteria closed, I moved to the lounge, where I sank into a sofa and killed time reading magazines that had been scattered around. The lounge wasn’t well air-conditioned, so between that and the sunlight coming in through the windows, it felt as hot as being outside. Even just sitting still, I started to sweat.

I decided I would only return to the apartment once I’d gotten Emori’s opinion. I wanted to firmly establish my stance before I met with that girl again. To do that, I felt I had to explain the situation to

someone trustworthy and get an objective perspective on it.

Thinking about it, this was the first time I'd ever wanted to talk something out with someone. I guess that goes to show just how much that girl threw my mind into disarray.

Unusually enough, Emori showed up right on time that day. Maybe he was worried for me, since getting a call from me was such a rare occurrence.

Once I was done with my garbled explanation of events, he spoke.

"So to sum the story up, you tried to erase your memories with Lethe, but Green Green arrived by mistake, and you used it, giving you Mimories of a fictional childhood friend named Touka Natsunagi. Two months later, the girl who shouldn't exist moved in next door to you, and came to you being all friendly. ...That's basically it, right?"

"Stupid, isn't it?", I sighed. "But you're right, that's it."

"Well, I can't imagine you're lying, Amagai, so it must be true that's what really happened." With that, Emori grinned. "Was she cute?"

"I'm sure you know what the characters in Mimories are like," I replied in a roundabout way.

"So she was cute."

"Well, yes."

"So, did you get her down on the floor?"

"No way. It might be a honey trap, right?"

"Right. I think so too," he agreed. "But you're pretty mean for that to be the first possibility you think about. Normally you'd get all elated, and wouldn't get around to thinking that far."

In reality, I was just in such a panic that I couldn't move, but I

didn’t say that.

“I’m just thinking it could be a variation on that dating scam you told me about the other day, Emori. I wondered if client information might have leaked from the clinic, and some people with bad intentions got their hands on it to use it for scams.”

“Feels a little roundabout of a way to run a scam... but it’s not impossible,” Emori nodded. “Come to think of it, isn’t your family rich, Amagai?”

“That’s in the past. We’re not much different from an average family now.”

“So would a scammer pull off such an intricate scheme for a college student without much cash?”

“I got caught on that as well. What do you think, Emori? Can you think of any possible aims other than a scam?”

After two swigs of beer, Emori spoke modestly.

“Just to make sure, Amagai, but you’ve never once taken Lethe in your life, have you?”

“That’s right,” I affirmed. “Of course, even if you take Lethe, it also erases the memory of “having taken Lethe,” so I can’t be certain. ...What of it?”

“Oh, I’m just wondering if that girl’s not actually lying at all. Maybe you two actually were childhood friends, but you alone got those memories erased. So what you think are Mimories might turn out to be the revival of your actual past.”

“I can’t imagine.”

I let out a wry laugh. I thought it was a joke.

“Or maybe you’ve simply forgotten on your own. You always were forgetful, Amagai.”

“Even if I had forgotten, I’d surely remember when I saw her

face or heard her voice.”

“...But if by any chance. By the slimmest chance something like that’s happened...”

The tone of Emori’s voice dropped.

“I’d feel real sorry for that girl.”

I laughed again.

He wasn’t laughing.

My sole, lonely laughter echoed through the park, and was swallowed up by the night.

For a while, we drank in silence.

There was a strange air.

“At any rate,” Emori remarked to switch gears, “don’t let your feelings sway you into signing any strange documents.”

“I won’t.”

“Don’t even think about pretending to be fooled so you can see how it goes. Could end up that soon enough, you’ll lose the distinction between the act and how you really feel. Can’t risk that.”

“Yeah. I’ll be careful.”

After finishing off all the cans we brought, I thanked Emori and left.

As I was leaving, Emori muttered something to himself.

“...I see. Green Green, huh...”

It sounded like he was saying something like that.

I arrived at the apartment after 1 AM, when the residential district had gotten quiet and sleepy. A few mosquitoes flew soundlessly around the corridor lights.

My door wasn’t unlocked, and the lights weren’t on. I quietly opened the door and went inside, and found no girl in sight. I sighed

in relief and opened the window to let out the stuffy heat. Then I put a cigarette in my mouth and lit it.

The pot the girl had brought was gone. After expelling her from my room, I had left the cooking be without touching it. Afterward, she probably used the spare key for another unauthorized entry to get her pot back.

My head was getting numb the longer this unforeseen situation went on, but when I thought about it, this was perfect grounds for police intervention. My spare key had been stolen, and I kept getting intruded upon by a total stranger.

However, I didn't want to rely on the police just yet. There was no guarantee that their resolution of the situation would make the truth clear. If the situation were terminated before I could learn the true identity of the girl, I would be left wondering and never getting an answer for the rest of my life. What her objective was, why she knew the contents of my Mimories, why she was such a perfect replica of Touka Natsunagi -

"It's okay, you don't have to push yourself to remember."

...What if maybe she really had been someone I knew?

However foolish it may be, if even a tiny fraction of doubt remains there, it'd be my loss.

Soon, she's bound to try something again. When that happens, I'm going to guide the conversation from beginning to end to extract information and expose her goal.

Just as I settled on my objective and went to pour water into a kettle, I heard the door click open.

She's here early. I readied myself.

I put the kettle down and thrust my cigarette into the ashtray.

Surely, by the third time, I'll be able to handle this calmly. I

underestimated.

When I turned to the front door and spotted her, I froze over.

“Ah, you’re about to eat something bad for you again,” she said with disappointment, seeing the cup ramen on the counter.

Plain white pajamas. There was nothing odd about those in and of themselves. Maybe a little too “defenseless” for visiting a stranger’s room in the middle of the night, but it wasn’t that unusual for the part she was playing. So pajamas themselves didn’t warrant surprise.

The problem was, the pajamas had the exact same design as the pajamas Touka Natsunagi wore in the hospital.

The girl in front of me overlapped with Touka Natsunagi in my Mimories. More vividly than a real memory, the air of the hospital room that day was resurrected, as was that frail voice.

My chest throbbed deeply, and every cell in my body rustled.

Oh yes, this girl knows. She knows exactly how to effectively shake my heart.

She took off her sandals and entered the room, standing next to me. Her chilly, thin upper arm touched my elbow, and I drew it back as if I’d gotten an electric shock.

“Ah, oh well. I was getting a little hungry myself. Hey, make some for me too.”

I temporarily quarantined every emotion I had and faced her. And I tried to remember my initial objective.

Right, to extract information.

“To continue from yesterday,” I began.

“What is it?”

She looked at me with upturned eyes. I managed to keep myself from reflexively looking away and questioned her.

““You don’t have to push yourself to remember.” What did you mean?”

She smiled, as if to say “oh, just that?”

And she spoke like she was explaining it to a small child.

“When I say you don’t have to push yourself to remember, I mean you don’t have to push yourself to remember.”

It really was a Touka Natsunagi-esque manner of speaking. The girl in my Mimories was fond of those phrases like Zen dialogues. Why do I like being with you, Chihiro? Because I like being with you, Chihiro.

Desperately trying to keep myself from smiling over nostalgia toward a past that didn’t even exist, I made my distrust clear.

“It’s all just a bluff, isn’t it? Do you think if you say words that sound right enough, I’ll make a mistake that’s convenient for you?”

It was an intentional provocation. With this, maybe I could force her to show her next card to make me trust her. The more she speaks, the more she lies. And the more she lies, the greater the chance of holes in her story. That was my approach.

However, she didn’t go along with my provocation.

She just smiled lonesomely and said:

“I don’t mind if you think that for now. If you can’t believe we were childhood friends, you don’t have to. If you just remember that I’m on your side, that’s enough.”

With that, she added another person’s worth of water to the kettle and turned on the stove.

It seemed this wasn’t going to be simple. Like any good scammer, she knew when to step forward and when to step back.

I couldn’t expect much in the way of results fighting on this front. I decided to cut her down from another angle.

“You probably wouldn’t know, but I didn’t get Mimories of my own volition. I was trying to forget my past with Lethe, but I was just sent Green Green by mistake.”

“Yeah, I know that’s how you’re interpreting it,” she nodded, looking like a know-it-all. “And?”

“Unlike your typical Mimory user, I don’t have any attachment to my Mimories. So I have no interest in the character Touka Natsunagi within me. If you thought you could wave around her name and get in my good graces, you were dead wrong.”

She snorted at that.

“What a liar. How much you were fawning on me when you came home drunk two nights ago?”

Fawning on her?

At once, I retraced my memories. But no matter what, I couldn’t remember the part after I entered my room. After our most unexpected meeting and exchanging a few words with her, I was completely missing any memory of the process by which I then ended up in bed.

But fawning on a stranger - and a girl around my age, too - was an act too bold to imagine myself doing. However drunk I got, my fundamental personality wouldn’t change. Short of having a split personality, that was simply impossible.

This was probably a bluff, too. Or rather, more of a joke in bad taste.

“I don’t remember anything like that,” I stated clearly. But my voice was tinged with deep unrest.

“Hmph. You’ve even forgotten things two nights ago?” She didn’t attempt to strike my weak point, stopping at only a thin smile. “Well, at any rate, you should show some restraint with

alcohol.”

The kettle was emitting steam. She turned off the burner and poured the hot water into two cup ramens. And without me having to drive her out, she took her cup ramen over to the room next door. Leaving me with a “Good night, Chihiro.”

Way to dodge the question.

*

The moment I stepped off at the station nearest my parents’ house, I felt like turning back right away. I want to hop on the up-train back to my apartment right now; my whole body quivered in resistance, hoping to leave this town at once. But after coming this far, I couldn’t leave empty-handed. Deciding to think of this like a mental trial, I forced myself to cheer up.

I didn’t dislike the town itself. Looking back on it, it was a very comfortable place to live. A relatively new town built among hills, with a population under 20,000. It had good access to the central city, and both public facilities and flourishing businesses. Most of the population was middle-class and didn’t like trouble, so it was quiet. It had nice green scenery, and while it might be a little boring for youngsters seeking stimulation, it was an ideal town for living out a healthy childhood.

I didn’t have any bad memories there. Sure, I was a lonely child, but that fact didn’t cause me any unpleasant experiences (at least as far as I can be sure). Whether it was an inclination of my generation or I just happened to be surrounded by those kinds of people, I don’t know, but there were no big cliques at the school I went to, just three or four groups scattered around like islands. So

even if they had individual tastes, there was no opportunity for anything like peer pressure.

Actually, taking a look at that situation, I feel it was simply that there were nothing but “good kids.” I only know this now that I’ve left the town, but there were an almost bizarre number of well-developed kids there. I don’t know why. Maybe the local color just drew in people like that.

I wasn’t displeased with the town. The target of my displeasure was me who lived there. Regardless of having such a blessed stage to grow up on, it hurt to confront my own worthlessness in being unable to make a single beautiful memory there.

The town was perfect, and only I wasn’t.

I saw shadows of my past self in various places along the way to my parents’. 6-year-old me, 10-year-old me, 12-year-old me, and 15-year-old me were there, just like they had looked at the time. All of them looked up at the sky emotionlessly, patiently waiting for something to come change them.

But in the end, nothing happened. 20-year-old me knew that.

I should finish my business and leave quickly, I thought. Before I’m crushed by this eighteen-year void.

Emori’s question had led me here.

“Just to make sure, Amagai, but you’ve never once taken Lethe in your life, have you?”

That should be correct, I thought.

But when I thought about it, I had no proof.

Among the options for Lethe is whether or not you forget the fact you took Lethe, and it’s strongly recommended you do that. Because if you don’t, you’ll forever be followed by the question of

what you took Lethe to forget.

As a result, just because I didn't have any memory of it didn't mean I had never taken Lethe. My parents were of the opinion that their son didn't need Mimories, but it occurred to me now that I had never heard their views on memory erasure. There was a non-zero possibility that their approach to child-rearing allowed an exception for the use of Lethe.

I arrived home. Sitting in the corner of the residential district, this generically-built twenty-year-old household was my parents' house where I was born and raised. I tried the intercom just in case, but got no reply. My mom had left long ago, and my dad was at work, so this was natural.

When I unlocked the door and went inside, I was met with a nostalgic smell. That said, I didn't feel any sentimental-esque sentimentality welling up. It just added to my desire to go back to the apartment. For me, the place I "went home" to was no longer my parents' house, but my cheap apartment room.

I went up the creaky stairs to the second floor, and entered my former room. Sure enough, the room had been left exactly as it was when I left. It seemed extremely dusty, so I opened up the curtains and windows before getting to work.

...Suppose there's a slim chance an acquaintance named Touka Natsunagi existed.

If there's some clue to her existence, where else would it be if not in my old room?

That's what got me to come here, but I did have one major worry. If I remember correctly, when I left this house, I went through and tossed most of my belongings. The period from high school graduation to my move was so busy, I don't remember what

I threw out and what I kept. It's possible that I threw out anything that could tell me about my past relationships.

I did a quick search of the room, and as expected, my graduation yearbooks had been wiped out. I couldn't locate the one for grade school, nor middle school, nor high school. Well, yeah. There's nothing more unsightly for a person who wants to forget the past. Naturally, I also discarded things like graduate essays or group photos. All that seemed to be left was an English-Japanese dictionary, a desk light, and a pen holder.

Not only any clues about Touka Natsunagi, but any clues about myself had disappeared from this room. With this level of thoroughness, I'd be surprised if even a single strand of hair remained.

If I contacted my middle school, I wonder if they would show me a yearbook from the year I graduated or a roster? They'd probably refuse me, wanting to keep personal information secure. If I could ask a former classmate to lend me their yearbook, that would work just fine, but this was also not an option for someone with no friends in middle school. I didn't even remember any names, much less contact information.

The search was over in no time at all. There was nothing more I could do. I lay down on the faintly dusty floor and spread out my arms and legs, listening to the cicadas. The sun shone in through the windows from the west, drawing a misshapen orange rectangle on the opposite wall. The sharp smell of bug repellent wafted out of the open closet, and I mentally related it to the changing of seasons.

But in reality, it was right in the middle of summer. August 12th. The rainy season had long since cleared up, yet this

ambiguous weather just kept going.

“Chihiro, are you home?”

My name was called from the hallway. It was my dad’s voice.

It seemed I’d fallen asleep. Because I was lying on the floor, my muscles ached.

As I sat up and wiped the sweat off my forehead, the door opened, and my dad’s face appeared.

“What’re you doing there?”

On seeing his son’s face for the first time in a year and a half, he spoke bluntly.

“I just came to get something. I’ll leave soon.”

“Doesn’t seem to me like this room has anything to come get.”

“You’re right. There wasn’t.”

He shrugged his shoulders and started to turn, looking as if he couldn’t bear to entertain me, but I called to him.

“I just want to make sure of something...”

Dad slowly turned to me. “What?”

“Have you ever used Lethe on me?”

There were a few seconds of silence.

“Never,” he declared. “That’s the way we raised you, right?”

In other words, he considered memory implanting and memory erasure to be in the same category.

“Then does the name Touka Natsunagi sound familiar to you?”

“Touka Natsunagi?”, my father repeated, as if reading off the name of a rare flower. “No idea. Someone you know?”

“Don’t worry, it’s fine if it doesn’t sound familiar.”

“Hey now, I answered your questions, so you better at least explain what’s going on here.”

“I got a letter from a person by that name. She’s calling herself an old classmate of mine. I figured it might be some kind of scam, but I don’t trust my memory too well, so I wanted to check with you just in case.”

I had prepared that lie in advance, by adding a bit to the story Emori had told me.

“Just in case, huh.” Dad scratched his scruffy chin. “Were you always the diligent type?”

“Of course. Like my parents.”

He laughed, and went out to the hallway. He was probably about to start drinking. Drinking whiskey and reminiscing about Mimories was the only thing he looked forward to in life.

When dad was indulging in fictional memories, he had a very gentle expression. An expression full of affection that he never once directed at his wife or son. If only reality had satisfied him, my father could’ve been a really good person. That’s what I guessed.

As I put my shoes on by the front door, I realized my dad had been standing behind me. In one hand he held a glass with whiskey and ice, and in the other was a piece of paper folded four times.

“You mentioning a letter reminded me,” he said. He already seemed to be getting drunk, as his whole face was turning red. “There was a letter addressed to you.”

“To me?”

“Yeah. That said, it’s from pretty long ago by now.”

Dad tossed it to me. I picked up the paper from the floor and opened it.

And I was thrust into a whirlpool of confusion.

I was right to come here after all, I thought.

“Last winter, I stained my coat and borrowed yours temporarily, and that was in the inside pocket. I figured you’d say you didn’t want it, but I’d feel bad for whoever wrote it if I threw it out, so I held onto it.”

“No,” I said, folding the letter up. “You really helped. Thank you for doing that.”

My dad took a drink of whiskey and returned to the living room without a parting word.

After leaving the house, I again opened the letter with no sender.

This is what it said.

“I was happy to have met you, Chihiro. Goodbye.”

*

On the train ride back home, I looked up the clinic I’d purchased my Mimories from on my phone.

When I typed in the name, the website for the clinic that was surely there when I checked three months ago had vanished from the search results. Thinking I got the name wrong, I took the clinic card out of my wallet, but I didn’t notice any typo.

There was a phone number on the card. The reception hours would be over soon, so I got off the train at the nearest station to make a call. I sat on a bench on the platform and dialed the number, making sure it was correct.

The ringback tone didn’t play.

“The number you have dialed is not in service. Please check the number and try your call again.”

After attempting various other search terms, I learned that the

clinic had shut down two months ago. But as much as I tried to dig deeper, I couldn't find any information beyond "it shut down." There was only one post to that effect on the town's community board.

I gave up, got on the next train, and returned to my apartment.

*

She was sleeping in bed. Of course, I mean my bed, not hers. She was curled up in those usual white pajamas, letting out light breaths.

I called to her, but she didn't show any sign of waking, so I timidly shook her shoulder. Why do I, the owner of this room, have to show concern for an intruder? Hesitating like this is only prolonging things further, I thought. But I didn't have the guts to slap her awake or anything.

After three shakes, she opened her eyes. Seeing my face, she happily said "Ah, welcome home." Then she sat up and did a little stretch.

"Sure enough, a freshly aired-out futon feels good."

I looked down at her wordlessly for a while.

...Who had written that letter, I wonder?

I had left only one coat at my parents' house, the duffel coat I wore in middle school. The last time I put my arms through that coat was in third year at graduation, so I could assume the letter was put in the inside pocket during the winter when I was 15.

But in middle school, there was no one so friendly with me as to write such a letter. Was it someone's idea of a prank? But the text was too self-contained for that. A prank would surely be trying

to get some reaction out of me. They'd call me behind the school, or write down a name.

I mentally compared the handwriting of the letter with the note left in the fridge. I could say it was similar if I wanted, and I could say it wasn't if I wanted. Besides, handwriting's bound to change at least a little from age 15 to age 20.

"What's wrong?"

Looking at me as I thought in silence, she cocked her head to the side.

Even that gesture was exactly like the Touka Natsunagi in my Mimories.

"...You're going to keep insisting you're my childhood friend, are you?"

"Yeah. Because that's what I am."

"My father told me he's never heard the name Touka Natsunagi. How do you explain that?"

"Doesn't that just mean one of us, me or your father, is lying?", she answered promptly. "Is your father an honest person?"

That shut my mouth.

Now that she mentioned it, there was no proof that dad had answered my questions honestly. My father who liked to collect fictions was, at the same time, someone who liked to spread fictions. If there were times he told lies for no reason, surely there were also times he told lies for a reason. If he'd lied to justify himself, surely he'd also lied to deny others.

That family was a pack of lies. How much could I trust my father who sat at the head?

"You've forgotten a lot of things."

The girl calling herself a childhood friend slowly stood up and

shortened her distance from me.

“But that might be because you needed to forget.”

Standing face to face like this, the gap between our heights at 15 had only grown. I knew that from the strangely different angle at which her face looked up at me. Her physique had become much more feminine, yet still, she had hardly any excess meat as usual, so imagining how I could now lift her up more easily than back then -

No. *That’s not my past.*

“Just say it. What have I forgotten?”

Her expression clouded slightly. “I can’t really tell you right now, Chihiro. It doesn’t look like you’re ready yet.”

“That’s how you intend to dodge the question, huh? If I’m forgetting something, give me at least a single piece of proof -”

I wasn’t able to continue past that.

“Chihiro,” she whispered, putting her face in my chest.

Her thin fingers stroked my back lovingly.

“You can take it slow. Just remember a little bit at a time.”

My head shuddered, like hot liquid was being poured in through my ears.

I reflexively brushed her away. She lost balance and landed on the bed on her behind, then looked up at me, a bit surprised.

More than anything, I was relieved the bed was there for her to tumble onto.

After swallowing down a “Sorry, are you okay?” that made it up as far as my throat, I spoke.

“...Please leave.”

Maybe because I felt guilty, what came out was a very timid phrase.

“Right. I get it.”

She nodded obediently and innocently smiled, as if not minding at all that I'd violently pushed her.

"I'll come again. Good night."

When she returned to the room next door, a deep silence fell.

I put a cigarette in my mouth, hoping to erase the traces of her presence she left behind. I couldn't find my lighter, so I went to the kitchen to light it with the stove burner, and there I noticed a wrapped plate on the counter. Inside was omelette rice covered in demi-glace sauce, still warm.

After some hesitation, I threw the food in the trash. It's not like I was wary that it might be poisoned or anything.

That was just one way of expressing my intentions.

Once I finished my cigarette, I dug around in the back of a drawer, and prepared a little trick that could help me get the jump on the scammer. Then I poured half a glass of cold gin and drank it down straight. I brushed my teeth, washed my face, turned off the lights, and lay down in bed. When I closed my eyes, I faintly smelled her, so I got up, flipped the pillow, and lay down again. Of course, that was far from enough to do away with her scent, so that night, I dreamt I was napping with Touka Natsunagi.

In her well-cooled room, our young selves were sleeping together up close like friendly twins. The curtains were closed, so the room was dark, with a different kind of silence from night. Being a weekday, the residential district was totally quiet; I couldn't hear a thing other than wind chimes rustling in the hall. It was such a peaceful, quiet summer afternoon, you could imagine that all humanity except for us had died off.

Chapter 4: Sheer White, Of Course

Because I had no tendency to read, a “library” to me meant “the school library,” and “the school library” meant “a place of refuge.” From grade school to high school, libraries were a kind of refuge, as well as a kind of detainment center.

Students who had no place in the classroom, unable to fit in with the rest, fled to the library first. Students who had no place in the library either fled to the infirmary. Those who had no place even in the infirmary holed up at home. Like going from a detainment center to a jail, and from a jail to a prison. There were at least a few students who just suddenly stopped attending, but the majority of the incompatible went through this kind of process for their withdrawal from school life. And most of them never again set foot in a classroom.

Most of the “library dropouts” would return to class after a few hours. The small portion who spilled out of the library became “infirmary dropouts,” and it was rare for anyone to crawl up out of there. Students who stayed in the library for months were practically non-existent; those were either the now-endangered species of true readers, or weirdos like myself who became too suited for the library.

In middle school and high school, I spent large portions of my long lunch breaks in the library. But I can’t recall a single memory of picking up any of the books there. I was doing one of two things: studying, or sleeping.

One part of it was a simple lack of interest in books, but more importantly, I felt like I wanted to always stay aware of the fact I wasn’t someone who was using the library as intended. I didn’t

want to be lumped in with those who fastidiously pored over books with a face that said “I’m here because I want to read, unlike the rest of you who are just escaping the classroom.” (Though thinking about it now, what they were doing and what I was doing were fundamentally the same.)

So although that was the only form in which I cared to be in a library, on this day, I had come to the prefecture library with a proper motive. Of course I hadn’t come to check out a book. I might ultimately end up doing so, but there was something I wanted to try first.

I showed my card at the front desk and filled out a form for permission to use the database. I could access medical business databases from the library computers. That was why I hadn’t gone to the nearby city library, but to the distant prefecture library. Mimory-related research had made its most rapid advancements in the past few years, so I wanted to get the most up-to-date information I could from technical magazines.

The last time I came here, I researched the safety of Lethe. My goal today was to research how Mimory implantation might cause confused memories.

To be more specific, this is what I wanted to know. Can people mistake reality for Mimories? Is it possible for them to become convinced that their actual childhood is the product of Green Green?

It’s not as if I believed that girl, of course. But in light of my indecisiveness last night, I couldn’t deny there was a part of me still wanting to believe in the “reality theory.” If I really do believe she’s a scammer, I shouldn’t be getting put out of sorts this badly.

I wanted clear evidence telling me why. I needed conviction

that Mimories were Mimories no matter what, and had no relation to reality. Otherwise, I would surely be tricked by her sooner or later.

No, if there's anyone tricking me, it's me. My desire for her words to be the truth, my desire for Touka Natsunagi to exist, they're spontaneously causing the confusion in my memories.

I had to cut my naïve hopes at the roots.

I typed some general terms in the search box and printed out every bit of material that looked even a little worth reading. I mindlessly worked for about an hour, and after looking over most of the titles, I grabbed my printed documents and headed to a reading room. And I spent half the day reading through them.

I found a handful of cases for the opposite situation. It did not seem too uncommon to mistakenly believe that events in your Mimories really happened. It told me that in the end, people believe what they want to believe. When they can't bear reality, people will distort their senses. That's easier to do than changing reality.

On the other hand, while I searched for it plenty, I didn't find a single case of people thinking real events were Mimories. I was relieved. I'd managed to nip at least one of my worries in the bud. It's possible I just went about my search in the wrong way, but just knowing there weren't likely any major cases of those symptoms was huge.

I took a big breath and leaned back in the chair. Only then did I notice it was pitch black outside. The library had lost about half of the visitors from during the day. I stuffed the documents in my bag, lightly massaged my eyes, and stood up.

After taking two steps past the automatic entrance door, I

suddenly smelled the dense scent of a summer night. I had a brief dizzy spell, probably from my inability to keep up with the quantity of information that smell, by association, brought to mind. 19 years' worth of summer memories were laid out end to end, running alongside me.

The smell of a summer night is the smell of memory. That's the thought I had every time this season came around.

It was exactly the time of day when workers coming home from work and students coming home from school mingled together in the train. "Rush hour" may not mean much in rural areas, but being in an enclosed space with passengers whose shirts were soaked with a day's worth of sweat soured my mood.

I held tight to a strap, gazing out through the windows at the town lights rushing past. About every five minutes, a wave of languid sleepiness came in and receded. My overexerted eyes were as bleary as if I'd been up all night. However, there was value in having that kind of fatigue. Tonight, I could probably confront that scammer and not even be fazed.

The train shook severely as it took a curve. A middle-aged man standing beside me lost his balance and bumped into my shoulder. He gave me an accusing stare, but after that one look, became absorbed in what I could tell was some kind of gossip magazine.

I pretended to be pushed by a passenger on the opposite side to sneak a peek at what he was reading.

I had decided from the start that it would be some worthless article.

The outlined title immediately caught my eye.

The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Substite

My drowsiness was blown away in an instant.

I kept myself from talking to him right that moment, waiting until the man disembarked. He got off one station before mine. I followed after him, and after passing the ticket gate, called to him.

“Excuse me.”

The man turned around. After a few seconds, he seemed to realize I was the passenger who was standing next to him on the train.

“What is it?”, the man said timidly, a complete inversion of his arrogant attitude earlier.

“Um, about the magazine you were reading before...”

I was going to ask the name of the magazine, but the man said “Oh, something caught your interest?”, and held the magazine tucked under his arm out to me.

“I was going to throw it away anyway, so you can have it.”

I thanked him and took the magazine. The man switched his suitcase to his freed-up hand and gracefully departed.

I went back through the ticket gate, sat on a faded bench on the train platform, and opened the magazine. I found the article in no time. It wasn’t even half a page long, but the information there was more valuable to me than any of the dozens of documents I’d read at the library today.

It was about a young man who lost his wife.

She died before his very eyes. It was a brutal way to go. A miserable end that denied her any respect as a human, and would make those who witnessed it have difficulty remembering how she’d been in life. Right after his wife lost her life, the man was set

on purchasing Lethe. Because his wife probably wouldn't want to remembered this way, either.

It wasn't like they could extract only the sad memory. If it was only her death he couldn't remember, there was no way that wouldn't cause inconsistencies. Before long, he would likely attempt to get that memory back. To forget it, he would have to thoroughly forget. Everything from the day he met her, to the day they parted.

And that's what he did. He used Lethe to erase all memories related to his wife.

But even though the memories were gone, the ever-present sense of loss, like he'd lost half his body, wouldn't leave him. Even so, he didn't feel any desire to remarry (though he thought this would be his first marriage). Just like the sense of loss, the fear of losing his partner was also deeply engraved in his brain.

The choice the man took was to use Honeymoon; that is, to obtain Mimories of a fictional marriage. One month after receiving counseling at the clinic, the Honeymoon created based on his latent desires arrived. It fit perfectly into the hole in his heart. He couldn't even feel the Mimory engineer's hand in it. These are exactly the memories I was seeking. He loved the false memories of his wife, and found peace of mind in them.

But not too long after, he began to have nightmares. He couldn't remember them when he was awake, but he at least remembered he was having the same one over and over. It felt like it contained all the malice in the world, and he cried into his pillow from the time he fell asleep to until he woke.

Two years later, he learned that the memories he thought were Mimories were his actual past. What he had taken that day

was not Honeymoon, but Memento. He was mistakenly given not nanobots that implanted Mimories, but nanobots that brought back erased memories. They had gotten him mixed up with another customer who had a similar name. The person he thought was his fictional wife was his departed real wife.

Unfortunately, the article didn't touch on what he did after remembering all this - whether he decided to take Lethe again or not.

After reading over the article three times, I looked up. The train that came ten minutes later was sparsely populated, and all the passengers looked exhausted. I sat down on the side, closed my eyes, and got my thoughts in order.

I had no guarantee the article was a true story. Maybe it was just something a writer fabricated, with no basis whatsoever.

But it made sense that such a thing could conceivably happen. Memento's ability to recover memories isn't perfect. If you're still missing "the memory of erasing your memory" and can only remember the core part, it'd only be natural to assume those are Mimories.

Now I was back to square one. No, maybe it was worse than square one. I was entranced by this new, dreamlike theory I was putting together. The Mimories I thought were a product of Green Green were actually real memories repaired by Memento; I'd only temporarily lost them because of Lethe. So those wondrous days were no pipe dream, for my childhood friend Touka Natsunagi really existed - alas, that possibility was making my heart dance.

*

Just because I had no tendency to read, it didn't mean I had a tendency to listen to music either. On sleepless nights, I might put on a radio station, but that was it. I'd never once spent any money on music. So I don't have a clue what songs are popular or what the classics are.

But I could immediately remember the title of that song.

She was lying in wait in my room again today. While standing in the kitchen putting a meal together, she was humming.

It was an old song. A song Touka Natsunagi often hummed. Her father was a record collector, so she had a fair bit of knowledge about music.

The nostalgic memory stimulated my Mimories.

I smelled old books.

"When I was little, I didn't understand the lyrics at all," Touka said, after lifting the record needle.

"It's a cheery tune, so I expected the lyrics were cheery too. Reading over the lyrics once I could read English better really surprised me. I couldn't believe I'd been humming such a pessimistic song all this time."

We were in Touka's father's study. She would often invite me to sneak in there when we had time on our hands or got tired of studying. Then she would carefully put a record in the player as if it were a precise ritual, and have me listen to it with a haughty look on her face.

I had no interest in music, but I liked the time spent in the study with Touka. It was a very cramped room, with only one chair to boot, so we chose to sit close together on the floor. Once we entered adolescence and started keeping a certain distance

between us, this was the one time could make an exception and stick together. She too thought of the music as secondary, and a few times failed to notice she was putting on the same record two days in a row.

In that way, her saying “let’s listen to a record” meant more to me than the words themselves. “Let’s listen to a record” was a phrase that condensed the innocent affection of “Is it okay for me to be with you more?” and “I want us to have some time together.”

Inevitably, I ended up liking everything associated with the study. Old books, LP records, globes, hourglasses, mantle clocks, paperweights, photo stands, bottles of vodka (I remember it was a brand named Hysteria Siberiana). With the study as the intermediary, these things were tied to Touka’s warmth and touch.

The song she was humming, I came to hum often as well. When we were together and ran out of things to talk about, one of us would start humming along.

“What were the lyrics like?”, I asked. I hadn’t really cared about the lyrics, but just wanted to extend the conversation to stay in the study a little longer.

Touka stared at a point in space for a few seconds as if checking a cheat sheet, then answered.

“There’s a girl he finds annoying to be around, but as soon as another man takes her, he starts to adore her, wailing “please come back to me,” “give me another chance.” It’s that kind of song.”

“Basically, you don’t know what you’ve got until it’s gone.”

“That’s about right,” she nodded. Then after a pause, she made an addendum. “That’s why you should be careful too, Chihiro.”

“Me?”

“Even if you think I’m annoying, don’t you dare leave me behind.”

“I definitely don’t think you’re annoying, though.”

“Hmm...”

There was a vague silence. As I searched for another topic, without any forewarning, Touka drooped toward me.

Still leaning her weight on me, she guffawed like a drunk with a screw loose.

“This... might be a little annoying,” I said to cover up my embarrassment.

“No complaining,” Touka chided. “Or else another man’ll take me.”

I obediently went along with her.

The humming stopped, and at about the same time, I returned to the present.

“Welcome home,” she turned and said. “Hey Chihiro, I’m pretty proud of my cooking today. I want you to try it, at least one bite.”

Having trouble focusing my eyes, her figure was blurry.

In my head, I heard the sound of some thick part coming loose.

“Chihiro?”

My outstretched hand grasped her delicate shoulder.

A moment later, I’d pushed her over. Her back hit the ground and she lightly gasped. I got on top of her and quickly carried out my objective.

The key was in the pocket of her shorts. After checking that it was the key to my room and not hers, I released her.

She sat up and went “You startled me...” in a quiet voice. Then

without any attempt to straighten her clothes, she looked up at me dumbfounded.

I pointed to the door.

“Get out.”

She stumbled to her feet, put on her shoes, and stood in front of the door. She put her hand on the knob, but then turned back to me.

“...No matter what, you don’t want to believe me?”

Just the opposite, I thought.

If I let my guard down even a little, I’d end up trusting her - and that’s exactly why I have to behave so coldly.

As I stood there without answering, she smiled sadly. She turned her back to me again, and prepared to leave the room.

“Wait.”

When she turned back to face me, I grabbed the plate of her cooking. It was a stew of colorful summer vegetables, prepared so neatly, you could call it nervous.

“Ah...” She let out a quiet voice.

I tilted the plate, and her home cooking was sucked up by the trash can.

I stuck out the empty plate and said:

“You take this back.”

She stared at the trash, not moving an eyebrow. Then she wordlessly took the plate, left the room, and quietly shut the door.

My first victory, I thought. I’d shaken off her allures and proven that I had already dominated the illusion of Touka Natsunagi.

But despite having finally gotten a blow in, I didn’t feel satisfied. In fact, the more time passed, the more my mood sank. I took gin out of the freezer, poured a glass, and took two drinks.

Lying on the mat, I gazed up at the ceiling and waited for alcohol to wash away my hard-to-place unhappiness.

While untying complicated and knotted thoughts, I suddenly thought of something. I sat up forcefully and booted up the laptop on the table.

*

Why had I overlooked something so basic?

It must have completely slipped my mind because of my un-worldly lifestyle, but there's a little thing called social media, and it lets you find people by their name and area even if you don't have a phone number or email address.

Using this, it should be easy to get in contact with a classmate from middle school. Not only could I talk with them about that time, I might be able to ask to see their yearbook as well. It made me nervous thinking about reaching out to classmates who I barely ever communicated with, but if it could get me proof that Touka Natsunagi didn't exist, I couldn't not do it.

I made an account on a major social network and searched for my alma mater. After narrowing down the generation, familiar-sounding names came up one after another.

Reflexively, I felt a sense of suffocation. It was like the air that was in my middle school classrooms was wafting out into my room through the display. But it was just a momentary illusion, so the stormy feeling quickly subsided. I'm not a middle schooler anymore, and I'll never have to deal with those people ever again in my life - with the exception of the one I was going to contact now.

I found eight classmates. Six were girls, two were boys. I

looked through their posts one by one. I peeked into their lives. I knew there was no good reason to do so, but I couldn't help it.

They were varied lives. One who was studying abroad. One already employed and working hard. One going to a famous college on a scholarship. One working at a non-profit organization to support orphans. One who was in a student marriage with a classmate.

There were various photos. A photo of a large group of friends having a barbecue. A photo of lovers sitting shoulder to shoulder in yukatas. A photo of club members playing on the beach. A photo of someone holding a baby who'd only just been born. A group photo of the class reunion I didn't go to.

Once more, I felt like I'd been pierced by the emptiness of my life. But no jealous feelings welled up. A person crawling along on the earth has no reason to care what people above the clouds are doing. When things are this disparate, you even lose the will to make a comparison.

I clicked on the final person's account. Among the flowers high up on cliffs, there was one roadside flower mixed in. The photos she uploaded were shabby, not a single one containing a person. Her status updates were also horribly indifferent; just the feeling of "I made an account because everyone else did, but I don't really have anything to write" came through loud and clear. And scrolling back through her posts revealed that she lived in a nearby town.

I checked the account name again. Nozomi Kirimoto. Ahh, that Nozomi Kirimoto, I realized. I couldn't really recall her face or her voice, but I remembered her name a fair bit more clearly than my other classmates'. Because we were in the same class for three years straight, sure, but that wasn't the only thing. Nozomi Kirimoto

was one of the few people I've ever met who I could feel a sense of fellowship with.

She was a resident of the library. Not a "library dropout" intruder like me, but a pure reader. From the spring of first year to the winter of third year, she always visited the library. She read greedily, at such a speed that she might've read every book there. And lunch break wasn't enough to tide her over, so she also found time between classes and after school to crack open a book.

I remembered her for her extra-strength glasses that seemed to warp the outline of her head, and an unfashionable hairtie that bundled all her hair up. Her scholastic ability was nothing to write home about, and her face was decent. At a glance, you might think she'd be the overly-serious class chairwoman, but she was much too unsociable to apply for such a position. She was always alone. Always keeping her gaze low, choosing to walk in the shade and in the corners.

Three or four times in our three years of middle school, we paired up for a class or something else. A music class, an art class, and some kind of school event, I think. As fellow left-behinds, we were put together by process of elimination. That's when I learned that, while normally a shy girl, she could talk as much as a regular person once she got going.

No, there was nothing "normal" about it. Nozomi Kirimoto could speak Japanese more fluently than any child her age, beyond worthwhile comparison. So used to swimming in a sea of printed word, she knew a thing or two about using language effectively. She was brimming with that ability, and when a rare occasion for conversation came, she would happily test her sharpness. And after going on for a while, she'd sink into deep self-disgust and enter a

deeper layer of reticence.

That's the kind of girl Nozomi Kirimoto was. Unable to get used to the ways of this world, she tries to get used to her own way, and becomes further distanced from the world; that clumsy way of life was the only one she could manage.

It'll be her, I decided.

I opted to send a harmless message first, not touching on the real topic. Suddenly contacting an classmate who I hardly ever talked with to request to see a yearbook would end with me being suspected as a trader fishing for personal information.

The message I spent 20 minutes writing was incredibly awkward. To put it lightly, it read like a spam email written by a foreigner who only somewhat knows the language. Well, it's my first time ever sending an acquaintance a personal message, so not surprising. In truth, I sort of am a foreigner. Wherever I go, whoever I'm with.

I was dissatisfied with the message, but I knew my resolve was wavering with the passage of time, so I just sent it without any rewrites before I could sober up. Then I closed the laptop and lay on the floor.

I woke up that night from one of my usual nightmares. I crawled out of bed, went to the kitchen, poured some water, and drank three glasses in a row. I always did that when I had a nightmare. I could tell that drinking the cold water returned a sense of reality to my body, giving the nightmare no place to stay and driving it away somewhere. And in a few minutes, I'd be able to forget what kind of dream it even was. At times when the lingering fear wouldn't go away, I drank a little gin. That generally made me

forget everything. Clear liquids have that kind of power. The waters of forgetfulness that Lethe is named for must have been clear and beautiful indeed, I imagined.

Even after a whole day, I received no reply from Nozomi Kirimoto. Did she suspect I was a canvasser or a trader, or did she know I was her classmate and just decide to ignore me? If it was the former, there was still hope, but I couldn't be sure either way while there was still absolutely no response. Actually, maybe she just doesn't regularly check social media.

I wondered if I should try sending another message. Right now, I would put everything else aside toward the goal of exposing Touka Natsunagi's true identity. So I couldn't be picky about my methods. Besides, Nozomi Kirimoto held no real importance to me. Even if using her led to disdain and scorn down the road, it wouldn't bother me one bit.

The problem was what to put in a second message. What words could I use to make her trust me? Could I get her interested in me? Like a young boy writing his first ever love letter, I rewrote it over and over. By the time even I didn't really understand the words I was writing, I suddenly thought of the worst idea.

And I went with that idea. I won't go into the details. Let's just say I was thinking of the scammer in Emori's story.

The effect was profound. Just an hour later, I got a message back from Nozomi Kirimoto. My heart didn't necessarily ache or anything from taking advantage of her conscience, but it was a strange feeling having to become a scammer myself to expose a scammer's lies. We promised to meet tomorrow afternoon by the train station, and I closed our communication there.

I looked at the clock: it was 9 PM. Going off the past few days, it was about the time the woman calling herself Touka Natsunagi would usually come to my room. I subconsciously looked toward the wall on the side where her room was, then toward my door. But somehow, I couldn't picture that door opening tonight.

In the end, she didn't come to try anything that night. Maybe she'd realized I wouldn't respond like she wanted and was reworking her strategy. Maybe she was pretending to be hurt by what I did to her cooking, and wanted to watch my reaction. Or maybe not doing anything tonight in itself was part of the plan. If that's the case, then her plan had regrettably succeeded. I listened for noises from the neighboring room all night, wondering what her reasons were for not coming over. By the time sleep finally arrived, faint morning sunlight was coming through the curtains.

*

It was our first time meeting in five years.

Nozomi Kirimoto was standing dutifully at the appointed spot in front of a stone statue, glaring sullenly at the rain with a blue umbrella over her shoulder. Her hair once tied with an unfashionable hairtie had been let down, her thick glasses had changed to contacts, and her outfit was more refined, but she fundamentally gave off the same impression as back then. Just like always, her eyes peeked out from under her bangs with a diluted color, like if you mixed every possible negative emotion in some water. It was as if the core concept of Nozomi Kirimoto had been retained while everything else was replaced with fresh new parts.

When she noticed me, she gave me a little bow. Then she

wordlessly pointed to a café across the street, and started walking without waiting for my reply. “Let’s get out of the rain first,” I suppose.

There were some guests who came in to get out of the rain, but not to the point that we couldn’t sit down. We sat at a table for two by the window, and after wetting her lips with ice water brought by the waiter, Nozomi Kirimoto slowly opened her mouth.

“What’s your aim?”

“My aim?”, I repeated.

“You had some intention in mind contacting me, didn’t you?”, she said with a low, gloomy gaze toward the corner of the table. “Evangelizing? Multi-level marketing? A referral sales program? If it’s anything like that, then I apologize, but I’ll have to be leaving at once. I don’t think I need saving, and I’m not hurting for money.”

I stared at her, taken aback.

She snuck a glimpse at me, then her eyes wandered.

“I’m sorry if I’ve misunderstood. But I couldn’t think of any other reason you would contact someone like me, so...”

Her voice got so hoarse by the last part, I hardly heard it.

I dragged the cup in the middle of the table toward me, and after some hesitation, took a sip.

What should I do? I wanted to say “It’s nothing like that, I simply contacted you because I wanted to meet you,” but her guess was pretty spot-on. I wasn’t a preacher or a multi-level marketer or anything, but it was true I hadn’t come here for the express purpose of meeting her. My true intentions were elsewhere.

It would be simple to feign ignorance now. But I didn’t think I could keep up that act for a long time. If I were the kind of person who could convincingly feign affection for someone, I wouldn’t be

so alone right now.

I called for a waiter to order coffee for us. And without confirming or denying Nozomi Kirimoto's doubts, I instead asked this.

"Could I assume you've actually had an experience like that?"

It was a meaningless question meant to fill a gap.

But it turned out to be the best answer.

Her eyes opened wide, her body shook, her eyebrows lowered, and she fell as silent as a rock. Even an onlooker could see how out of sorts she was, and I felt guilty, like maybe I'd done something wrong.

She kept her silence for a long while after that. Was she wondering what to say, or waiting for me to say something, or so upset she didn't want to talk with me ever again? I couldn't tell from her expression.

As I was about to apologize with "I didn't mean anything by it, please don't worry about it," Nozomi Kirimoto quietly muttered something.

I leaned on the table to hear her better.

"Right after I entered high school, I made a friend," she said in a parched voice. "I was shy and solitary, and that friend came to talk cordially with me every day. The first friend I'd ever had in my life. She had a good disposition, so unlike me, she was liked by the class. She could've gotten along with anyone, but she always gave me priority, and I felt honored."

A warm smile then came to her lips, but it didn't last two seconds.

"But just a month after we became friends, she took me somewhere strange. It was a meeting of some shady new religious

group I'd never heard of. The next week, and the week after that, she took me to that same place. Since I had no friends, she probably thought I'd be easily swayed. After I defiantly told her I didn't feel like joining and to stop inviting me, she stopped talking to me. Not only that, she spread malicious rumors around school, and for three years, I was given cold glares and assaulted with heartless words."

Our coffee was brought to us. The waiter seemed to recognize the tense silence between us, lightly bowed with a half-smile, and left.

"...That's terrible."

That was all I could say.

"Yes. It was," she nodded. "That's why I hate liars."

I didn't have the guts to tell her any lies after hearing that. I just have to tell her the truth; I steeled myself.

To take a different perspective, Nozomi Kirimoto thought it was highly likely I was a scammer, yet she still came to meet me. I guess she couldn't turn down a request. Which meant it would speed things up to honestly tell her my true intentions.

I sipped my coffee, then put my cup back in the saucer.

"You're half right, Miss Kirimoto."

Her face snapped upward, but then quickly drooped back down.

"Half?"

"I did have something of an ulterior motive contacting you. That's the truth."

"...What's the other half?"

"The person I contacted could've been anyone. There were a number of other candidates, but I felt like I would've hated to meet with any of the others. But I did feel I'd be fine contacting you. In

that sense, I think you could say I had the intent to meet you, Miss Kirimoto.”

She fell silent again. But this silence wasn’t so long.

She spoke with a blank expression.

“So then, what is your ulterior motive?”

It seemed she was getting straight to the point.

I silently thanked her, then got into the main topic.

“Is the name Touka Natsunagi familiar to you?”

“Touka Natsunagi?”

“Do you remember a girl in our middle school with that name?”

She folded her hands together on the table and thought it over.

“You probably know this, but I hardly interacted with my classmates in middle school as well. So I can’t say anything too definite. However...”

She peered at me through her long bangs, then spoke.

“At least as far as I can remember, I don’t think there was any student in class with a name like that.”

Then, Nozomi Kirimoto began naming classmates one at a time. It proved her forewarning of “I can’t say anything too definite” absurd. She was able to recite from memory the names of every classmate from each year’s class.

“I believe that’s all of them,” she said after she finished counting on her fingers. “It was quite a few years ago, so I’m not too confident.”

“No, I think you’re exactly right. That’s some amazing memory.”

“Though I can’t remember their faces at all. Strangely, it’s just

their names I can't forget."

I folded my arms and thought about it. Most likely, Nozomi Kirimoto's memory was the real deal. It was inconceivable that someone with memories this distinct would think the name of a classmate who did exist sounded unfamiliar. So as I thought, a student named Touka Natsunagi did not exist.

Yet even so, I was hesitant to resolve a problem based in memory with a solution based in memory. This whole chain of doubts has come from the fact that "memory can't be trusted." Part of me felt that settling the issue with someone's memory would just be a reiteration.

"I think your memories are correct, Miss Kirimoto," I told her, picking my words carefully. "But I would like at least one more clear piece of evidence to satisfy me. Do you still have the yearbook from graduation?"

"Err, yes. I think it's somewhere in my apartment."

"Would you be okay with showing it to me?"

"Right now?"

"Sure. I'd appreciate it sooner rather than later, but if it's inconvenient..."

"Then let's be going."

Before I could finish talking, she grabbed the receipt and stood up.

"After all, my apartment isn't too far from here."

We silently walked through the rainy town. There was no conversation between us, so you would never guess we were classmates reuniting after five years.

At times like this, I guess you'd normally talk about what's

been happening lately. Slide in some gossip about a common friend, gradually move the topic back into the past, bring up funny stories and memorable events from back then, and have a beautiful chat about old times.

But we had no good memories at all. We had no friends we'd kept up with to the present day, and trying to talk about recent events in our lives would just be miserable. We knew the both of us had quietly lived in the corners of the classroom, breathing stale air, getting only a brief respite in the library - we'd lived through gray days. We didn't feel any desire to dig pasts like that back up.

From the train station, we rode the bus for about 20 minutes, then walked for just 5 to reach Nozomi Kirimoto's apartment building. It looked considerably tidier than the old apartment complex I lived in; there weren't any stains on the outside, and the parking lot was full of light motor vehicles with bright colors that I guessed young women might like.

I felt like waiting outside the door, but she beckoned me into the room.

"You're in a hurry, right? I don't mind if you look at it here."

I felt a little awkward entering a girl's room when I wasn't even friendly with her, but she was right that I wanted to look inside that yearbook immediately. I'll just accept her kindness here. I leaned my wet umbrella against the wall in the hallway, and stepped into Nozomi Kirimoto's room.

The expression "messy" might not be fair. "A whole lot of books" is probably more suitable. There were three large bookcases, and all three were packed with books, with those that didn't fit within forming towers around the floor and table. Looking closely, their positions seemed to follow some system of hers, so

while it sounds strange, the impression I got was “a messy kind of orderly.”

“Sorry about my messy room,” she said bashfully, guessing at what I was thinking.

“No, you just have a lot of things. I don’t think it’s messy.”

While I didn’t have a good standard for what a regular girl’s room looked like, it was clear that Nozomi Kirimoto’s was quite a departure from the norm. It certainly had personality, but on the other hand, if you merely removed the mountains of books that gave you that impression, you’d suddenly find it to be a place of sheer anonymity. The table, the bed, the sofa, they all had symbolic designs that went beyond generic. As if you just wrote “table,” “bed,” “sofa,” and they were pasted in there.

She squatted in front of a bookcase. It seemed large books and albums were kept on the bottom shelf.

While looking for the yearbook, Nozomi Kirimoto asked me.

“I have to wonder, though, why don’t you have your yearbook? Did you not buy one?”

“I threw it away. I wanted to lighten my load when I left home.”

“Sounds like you,” she quietly snickered. “I thought of throwing it out myself, but as you can see, I’m not one to throw out anything shaped like a book.”

“Seems that way. But I’m glad for it.”

“Oh, don’t mention it.”

She found the yearbook on the second bookcase. She pulled it out and wiped off the dust, and handed it to me saying “here you go.”

First, I opened to the page of individual graduate photos. After

looking through my own class, I checked the other classes to just to be sure.

“Not there,” Nozomi Kirimoto remarked, looking at it from beside me.

I checked three times, but she was right; I couldn’t find a student named Touka Natsunagi.

After that, we checked one photo after another: group photos of the student council and club members, photos of classrooms and school events. Nozomi Kirimoto was able to correctly guess the names of each and every person.

“Chihiro.”

I was surprised to suddenly hear her say my name, but it seemed she just meant “that’s you in this photo, Chihiro.” In the photo she pointed to, I was writing on a blackboard.

In this photo, I looked as if I could be a model student who was earnestly taking part in class. But I knew that wasn’t the case. I was constantly looking at the clock then. Glaring at the wall clock above the blackboard, just waiting for class to be over. I wanted to leave school and be alone if only a second sooner. And the more I wished for that, the slower the second hand seemed to move.

The next photo to catch my eye pictured the first girl I’d found when I searched for my classmates online. It was a scene from a performance at the culture festival; truly an ideal photo for a yearbook. She was a graceful girl. Beautiful and not disagreeable, treating everyone equally well, so everyone liked her.

Suddenly, I recalled the photo of the class reunion that was uploaded to the girl’s account.

“By the way, Miss Kirimoto, did you go to the class reunion?”, I casually asked.

“No.” She shook her head slightly. “I suppose you didn’t either, Chihiro?”

“Right. There wasn’t anyone I really wanted to meet, and I doubt there was anyone hoping to meet me.”

“I felt the same way. Whoever I met, it would just make me sad. Besides -”

At that point, she froze. Because she had suddenly noticed a completely blank two-fold spread.

I didn’t know what that meant. At first I thought it a printing error. But immediately after, I remembered it was the place where you were supposed to have your friends write messages for you.

I nonchalantly turned the page, but she went “Sheer white, of course,” and smiled self-derisively.

I started to say “mine was the same,” but stopped. I think she already understood as much.

Before long, I’d checked all the pages. The yearbook had proven that no girl named Touka Natsunagi existed among my classmates.

Just before I left the room, Nozomi Kirimoto modestly went “um...” and asked me something.

“Who is this Touka Natsunagi person, ultimately? Why are you looking for her, Chihiro?”

“Sorry. I don’t want to talk too much about it,” I answered without turning around.

I wasn’t sure why, but I didn’t want to stay in this room a second longer. I wanted to quickly be back in my apartment and drinking gin by myself.

“Is that right?”

She withdrew easily.

I sighed, turned, and spoke.

“She’s a fictional person.”

With that one sentence, Nozomi Kirimoto seemed to know everything.

“A Substite?”

I nodded.

“Because of a slight accident, memories and Mimories have gotten mixed together in my brain. I’m being tormented with illusions of a girl who liked me in my head. Stupid, isn’t it?”

She gently smiled.

“I understand. Because I had a similar experience.”

Then she started to say something. She was probably going to go into her “similar experience.” But just before the words could escape into the air, she swallowed them back in her throat. Instead, she wrapped up the conversation with some different, inoffensive words.

“I hope you can wake up soon.”

I smiled a little. Then I said “Thanks for today.”

“No, I was happy to reunite with an old acquaintance too. Well then.”

Just before the door closed, I saw her waving slightly.

That was the last I saw of Nozomi Kirimoto.

It was still raining outside. A number of puddles had formed in indentations in the asphalt, and the pouring raindrops drew geometric designs. Someone once said that rain washes memories from the sidewalk of life. I wanted to quickly forget the series of memories that had been dug up today, so I stopped in the middle of opening my umbrella, closed it, and let myself be soaked for a

while.

Chapter 5: Hero

Ghosts have become remarkably less common since the advent of the digital camera. But some seemingly transferred to the electronic realm over the course of a few decades, as starting at some point, electronic reports of ghosts began to appear around the web. Most of them were just fabricated stories or intricate pranks, but despite them making some big news, there were a few incidents the truth of which was yet unexplained.

One of the most well-known electronic ghost stories is “The Kayano Sisters.” A woman reported that a friend who she called near-daily for five years turned out to have passed away two years ago. This story had a proper, twist resolution. As indicated by the “Sisters” in the title, the woman’s friend had an identical-looking little sister. The truth of the matter was that the younger sister had taken the place of her deceased older sister.

Contrary to the outgoing older sister, the younger sister had a withdrawn personality, and was friendly with no one but her big sister. The younger Kayano, after losing the only person she could talk to, decided to take the calls from her big sister’s friend and pretend to be her. And just like that, she continued to play the role of the deceased. She talked on the phone like her big sister, she met with the woman like her big sister, she kept posting to social media as her big sister. The Kayano sisters not only had exactly the same looks and height, the little sister also knew everything about her big sister, so the woman never remotely noticed the two had switched places. The two-year lie was finally exposed by the most minor of circumstances, but apparently the two formally established a friendship afterward.

If this were all it was, it would be a heartwarming tale. But there's a disturbing followup. There was an article about what appeared to be the last post the elder Kayano made on her account before she died, the contents of which sent out ripples. At a glance, the text seemed incoherent, but it could potentially be interpreted as "someone close to me is after my life." The article had to dig up the post from a third-party archive, so the fact the younger Kayano had deleted the original post caused a big stir. Rumor spread that the younger sister must have killed her elder sister to take her friend from her.

Ultimately, there was no explanation whatsoever given by the younger Kayano, the account was abandoned, and it now serves as a famous web ruin, perfect for daring someone to go visit.

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It rained for three days, then there was an almost apologetic cloudy day, followed by three more days of rain. The more this bad weather kept up, the more I felt I'd forget the color of a blue sky. The weather forecast said there was a huge typhoon approaching, and once that had passed, we would have clear weather for a while.

Really, it was a strangely rainy summer. It was rare to get major rain, but instead, rain as thin as fog kept falling ceaselessly. As a result, I was traveling back and forth between the coin laundry and my apartment. The coin laundry luckily had good AC, so while my washing was in the dryer, I could leisurely pass the time reading old magazines and newspapers.

In the span of that week, I lost one umbrella, one snapped in the wind, and one folding umbrella got stolen. I threw out my dirty

sandals and bought new ones. I tossed dehumidifying agents in the closet. That was about the extent of the rain's effect on my life. From the start, my days were empty save for my part-time job. During inclement weather, the video rental store had even less customers than usual, so it felt like running a souvenir shop deep in the mountains. There was a damp mildewy smell in the store, but the manager seemed not to care in the slightest.

I hadn't gotten any contact from Emori. I had no friends other than him, so I inevitably spent my time alone. As usual. This is life as usual for me.

On days off work, I went to the prefecture library to read through documents related to Mimories. There wasn't anything in particular I wanted to know, but I realized it was a little more fun to read scientific literature I wasn't interested in than magazines I wasn't interested in.

When I got tired of reading, I took a light nap, went to the rest area and got coffee from a vending machine, smoked two cigarettes, then returned to the reading room. When I heard the song "Sunrise, Sunset" announcing 5 PM, I took that cue to leave the library, buy canned beer on the way, and while savoring it, leisurely walk down rural roads from the station to the apartment. And while wondering if I should watch TV or listen to the radio, I'd eat a dinner of just cup ramen, take a shower to rinse off the day's sweat, drink gin until evening, and fall asleep by the time the sky was brightening.

Cigarette butts, empty cans, empty bottles. Through these things, I barely managed to sense the changing of the days. If it weren't for them, I'd surely have no distinction between yesterday and today. That was how unchanging my days were. I could hardly

remember what I was doing at this time a year ago.

I had my evidence in order. Dad and Nozomi Kirimoto's testimony. The class page of the yearbook. Sure enough, the childhood friend Touka Natsunagi didn't exist. My memories aren't wrong. She's no more than a Substite, a fictional person created by a Mimory engineer.

Now I just had to show my evidence to that scammer and make her admit defeat. That would end it all. I could drink the Lethe in the back of my closet and put a period on this foolish chain of events.

That was the plan.

Incidentally, since that day she left my room without saying "good night" to me, I'd completely ceased to see any sign of the woman calling herself Touka Natsunagi. I knew she was there because I could see her light was on at night, but she didn't make any movement worth calling movement.

Had she given up on ensnaring me? Or was she planning something intricate? I'd be lying if I said I didn't care, but I had no thoughts of going to talk to her myself. If she intended to let this end hazily, then let it happen. If she was working on a new plan, then I'd get revenge on her next time she came. And once some form of resolution arrived, that would be the ideal time to take the Lethe.

Like any other day, I drank until dawn, slept like I was passed out, and woke up to the sound of wind eight hours later. It was a storm. A whistling sound came through the gap in the window. I turned on the radio just in time to hear a report about the typhoon.

My head and throat ached. I had a hangover, and I'd smoked too much. I poured water into my stomach with a glass that still smelled of last night's gin, warmed up some premade coffee and slowly drank it, then stood under the ventilation fan and smoked. After turning two cigarettes to ash, I collapsed on the bed and listened to the radio and the rain.

I like rain. I like how fair it is, that absolutely everyone seems bothered by it. Whether you enjoy clear weather can really depend on the person, but everyone can only enjoy heavy rain in moderation. It's all you can do to sip on something warm in your room, accepting the abnormal feeling the storm brings from a safe location.

When I got tired of the radio, I put a cushion by the window and sat, then opened the book I'd checked out of the library yesterday. It was the biography of some famous person I'd never heard of in a field I'd never heard of and their achievements I'd never heard of. Personally, a book having nothing to do with me is what I want. It lets me forget that the person I am here and now exists. It was probably meeting Nozomi Kirimoto the other day that influenced me into suddenly wanting to read books.

Taking short breaks every thirty minutes, I carefully read through the book. Occasionally a stronger wind blew, and raindrops beat against the window glass. Time passed surprisingly sluggishly.

It was probably around 3 PM.

Suddenly, I felt an powerful hunger.

It was a violent hunger, the kind that took your humanity from you. Come to think of it, I haven't eaten a single thing since I woke up. As soon as I thought that, my stomach badly ached, as if some anesthesia just wore off.

I put the book down and looked below the sink, but there wasn't a single cup ramen left. Naturally, the refrigerator was also empty. I gave up and decided to smoke, but the cigarette I smoked earlier was the last one too. Apparently I'd been completely neglecting to go shopping.

My umbrella didn't seem like it'd be any good, so I wore a yacht parka with the hood pulled low, put on my sandals, and stepped out into the storm. It was darker than you'd ever expect 3 PM to be, and the path was littered with trash, tree branches, and umbrellas blown by the wind. I couldn't keep my eyes open in the driving rain, and every time there was a sudden gust, my body faltered.

It was unusually quiet inside the supermarket. I bought the cheapest cup ramen and cigarettes they had, tightly tied up the shopping bag, and left the store. The rain had gotten even more intense.

To hide myself from the fierce winds, I walked alongside the walls. Suddenly, I stopped. Something was staring at me from a window facing the road.

It wasn't a human. It was a cat. A tabby cat I remembered seeing many times in the area. I'd always thought of it as a stray, but it seemed it had an owner after all. It was glaring at me with a look of "You're a curious one to be going out in this weather." I approached the window and knit my brows, but the cat didn't move, fixed in place like a decoration as it stared at me.

When I returned to the apartment, I tossed my wet clothes in the washing machine and took a shower. When I went to pour water into the kettle after leaving the bathroom, I realized the hunger that had me at wit's end earlier had calmed down as if it

never happened.

I lay down on the mat and savored the taste of the cigarettes I just bought. The room was cool, and the rough texture of the mat was comfortable. Rain fell on the town without pause, stripping all meaning and intention from everything and washing it away. I thought of the cat at the window, and then, I thought about the ghost at the window.

*

The summer when I was 7, I saw a ghost.

What I'm about to tell you is some seriously inconsequential nonsense. First of all, the ghost here is not a real ghost. Secondly, this story is part of my Mimories to begin with. And at that point, it loses any meaning it could possibly have as a ghost story.

The ghost resided in an old local Japanese-style residence, and was always watching people pass by from a bay window on the first floor. It was the ghost of a girl with long hair, slender and pale, always giving off a melancholic air every time you saw her. Every time I passed nearby, she leaned forward, clinging to the window, and followed me with her eyes.

She must have been a child who died in that house a long time ago. I pitied her, and was afraid of her at the same time. For all I knew, she might be jealous of living children around her age, and was thinking of taking me with her. She watched me emotionlessly, but maybe deep in those colorless eyes, there burned a hatred for the living. I was afraid to look the ghost girl in the face, so I came to walk quickly down that road.

I had just happened to watch a summer special on TV about

the paranormal. I overheard a rumor about a child who went missing in the area several years ago. Several factors like this overlapped to convince me that the sickly girl who just watched me pass by through the window was a ghost. I didn't have an active imagination so much as a lack of wisdom.

That summer, I was attending swimming classes. Or rather, I was being made to attend them. My mom thought it was lonely for her son to stay at home all day for his summer break, so she signed me up for swimming lessons for a short time to get me out of the house and active. The pool was about 10 minutes from home, and there were only five students other than myself. Those five seemed to have been friends beforehand, so I was the only one left out. Of course, I'd felt that sense of alienation at home since I was born, so it wasn't really a problem. I only paid any interest to the ghost.

The pool was built on some very low land, so there was a single path you couldn't avoid taking to get to it, and the window in the ghost's mansion directly faced that path. My parents didn't escort me there or back, and I had no friends to go and return with, so I always had to walk in front of her alone. It wasn't as bad when going to the pool, while it was still light out, but it was often evening by the time I came back, and I shivered with terror thinking of making eye contact with the girl in the dark. At the same time, I felt like if I looked away, she might take that chance to do something. So even after passing the window, I checked behind myself repeatedly to see if she was there. (I never even considered she might have seen that as a sign of affection.)

Day by day, I saw the ghost more frequently. Not to spoil the fun, but she simply started to learn what times I passed through - yet I took the change as an ill omen. I bet this is leading up to

something, I thought.

My expectations were right, in a sense. Before long, the ghost started to smile from behind the window whenever she saw my face. It was an innocent smile, but my mind clouded with fear saw it as the cruel grin of a predator. In addition, that smile seemed to be reserved just for me, as the other kids said her expression didn't change at all when they went by. My worries became convictions.

That was an evil spirit. It was borrowing the form of a sweet girl, but it's really a hungry beast who sizes up humans and eats their souls. And I - for what reason, I had no idea - had been targeted by this evil spirit.

The fear slowly ate into my life. All I thought about was how I could get that evil spirit to spare me. Asleep or awake, the girl's face occupied my mind. It sounds an awful lot like I was a boy with a crush, except I was terrified to my core. I had nightly nightmares about her coming to get me, or crossing some point of no return when that window opened.

I considered talking with someone about it several times, but I'd come to think just acknowledging her existence itself would invite disaster, so I hesitated. Besides, I didn't have anyone to choose from, not having friends nor parents who cared.

It was a staggeringly long month. And yet eventually, an end arrived.

The last day of the program ended, I said goodbye to my two instructors, and I left the pool behind. My body was exhausted after swimming for a long time, but my steps were light. Now I would finally be free. No longer would I have to pass in front of that window. I wouldn't have to look at her face. My heart bounded at the thought.

The haunted mansion came into view. My heart beat fast. Because of the setting sun, I couldn't really see through the window from a distance. And yet I knew. She had to be there again today. With elbows on the windowsill and her chin in her hands, staring absentmindedly into the distance, leaning forward when she saw me and putting on that smile.

In fact, the ghost was there.

But she was somehow different today. When she saw me, she didn't budge, and didn't smile. Much like the first time I passed by, her eyes just followed me mechanically. I rubbed my eyes to inspect her expression.

When I noticed the ghost was crying, the awareness I had built up over the past month was turned on its head. The reversal was instant. The evil spirit threatening me didn't exist; there was only a living, breathing human girl.

To call her a ghost was absurd. The girl sobbing behind the window was simply an unfortunate prisoner, locked up in her house for some reason and longing for the outside, and that's why she always sat there. Her delicate body felt smaller than ever to me. I felt pathetic for having been afraid of such a timid girl.

At the same time, I crudely wondered why she was crying. With the threat removed, all that was left was shame over being so excessively afraid, and a pure curiosity toward the girl.

The concrete wall between the bay window and the road was no more than a meter tall, so it was easy to get past. I first threw over my slightly chlorine-scented bag, then hopped over myself. And I was now standing in front of the window I had only viewed from a distance before.

She watched me do this with a flabbergasted look. When I

lightly knocked on the window glass, she reared up as if struck by lightning, hurried to unlock the window, and opened it. And then we looked at each other up close for the first time.

It was an August evening full of the echoing cries of cicadas.

The girl smiled with a teary face, and let out a sound between “ehehe” and “ahaha.”

My suspicions about her had already been cleared up, yet I couldn’t help but ask.

“You aren’t a ghost, right?”

She blinked a few times, then softly chuckled. Then she put her left hand to her chest as if checking for a pulse, and slightly tilted her head.

“I’m alive. For now, at least.”

That was my first meeting with Touka Natsunagi. Over the next decade, I would be repeatedly teased for the foolishness of that question. And I was ultimately never told the reason she was crying that day.

To my 7-year-old ears, words like “asthma” and “spasms” sounded like words from a distant land. But I was able to faintly grasp the gist of it, that the girl had a chronic illness which made her parents forbid her from leaving the house.

“I don’t know when I might have an attack, so whenever possible, I won’t leave the house.”

Possibly because she’d explained her illness a lot, or because she’d heard these details from her parents and doctors many times, she was unusually eloquent when talking about her asthma, and spoke many words you wouldn’t expect to hear from a 7-year-old.

“I can’t be causing other people trouble, after all.”

No matter how you looked at it, those words weren't coming from her herself. Her parents must have focused on drilling that into her.

"If you go outside, you have an asthma attack?", I asked, trying out the term I'd just learned.

"Sometimes. If I do strenuous exercise, or breathe unclean air, or get anxious, it seems attacks get more likely. It's not like everything's okay if I'm at home, either..." Then the girl said another phrase that felt like it was in quotation marks. "At any rate, if I have an attack outside, it'll be troublesome for other people."

After digesting her explanation, I asked:

"Why were you looking out the window?"

She immediately lowered her face and went silent. And she bit her lip as if desperately holding back tears. It seemed I'd touched on a topic I definitely shouldn't have.

Immediately, I made her a proposal.

"Hey, let's go somewhere together."

She slowly raised her head. She had it cocked to the side, thinking "was this boy even listening to what I said?"

"You won't even have to walk. I'll carry you."

I told her "just hold on" and headed home in a big hurry. After tossing my bag down by the front door, I flew back to the haunted mansion on my bike. She was waiting in the same position as when she saw me leave, and smiled with relief to see me come back.

I stopped the bicycle and pointed to the luggage carrier.

"Get on the back."

She hesitated. "But my mom will be mad if I go out..."

"We'll be back soon, so don't worry. Do you not want to go outside?"

She shook her head.

“I want to.”

She got her shoes from the entryway and put them on, hopping down from the window and landing unsteadily. She carefully climbed over the wall, plopped down on the back of the bike, and grabbed my shoulders.

“Well then, if you please.”

I nodded. Then suddenly, I realized I hadn’t asked her name.

“What’s your name?”

“Touka,” she said. “Touka Natsunagi. And yours?”

“Chihiro Amagai.”

“Chihiro...”

She clearly repeated the name. It sounds strange, but that felt like the first time in my life someone used my name properly.

Until then, I had simply disliked my name. I thought it was a weak name that sounded too girly. But the moment Touka said “Chihiro,” I could feel a deep gratitude that my name was Chihiro.

Chihiro. It sounds good.

Thinking about it now, though, any name she called me would have sounded wonderful coming from her.

“I’m ready now,” Touka said from behind me.

I nervously started to pedal. The bicycle slowly moved with the two of us on it. Touka raised her voice in neither fully a scream nor a shout and clung to me.

“You gonna be okay?”, I asked without looking back.

“Umm, I dunno... I’m having so much fun, I might just have an attack.”

I hurriedly hit the brakes, and she gave her usual laugh between “ehehe” and “ahaha.”

“Just kidding. I’m totally fine. You can pick up the speed.”

That peeved me a little, so I tried to purposefully bike in a serpentine path. She held tight to my shoulders, laughing happily.

*

Mimories are made to go along with the client’s latent desires, but just putting in unprocessed desires as-is results in conflicts between the memories and Mimories. If you get Mimories that are clearly a departure from reality, they won’t stick as memories. They’re treated like another person’s story.

That’s why Mimories take a somewhat more realistic “best possibility” form, rather than being totally dreamlike. Something that wouldn’t be odd if it happened, but also, definitely didn’t happen. Something that should have happened. Something you wish had happened.

The Mimories implanted in me had, for the most part, been cleverly woven into my real past. For instance, it was true that I took swimming lessons for a time when I was seven. It was also reality that someone had stared at me as I went by a window every day. The difference was that it wasn’t a girl my age watching, but an aged cat.

It was also true that I was chosen as my class’s anchor for the track meet relay in middle school third year. The part about the girl who encouraged me and lifted the pressure from me, however, was not accurate. At the point I was passed the baton, our class was in last place, and I didn’t pass a single opponent, so we finished in last. There was no support, and no words of gratitude. In fact, our classmates didn’t have any expectations for the relay in the first

place. I was simply made to take the loss. ...I could go on and on with these examples.

The many episodes were a detailed simulation based on the premise of “what if a childhood friend named Touka Natsunagi existed?” What they depicted wasn’t simply nonsense. The lies were kept to a minimum, and the real me felt nothing wrong with my words and actions in the Mimories. I could naturally accept that I would react just like that if I were put in those situations. It was entirely plausible that it would have happened - if Touka Natsunagi had just been at my side.

To put it one way, they were my memories from a blessed parallel world. Or maybe it was a twin brother of mine, who you’d think was in the same exact circumstances, yet lived a more bountiful life than me. That’s why the Mimories were realistic - and all the crueler for it. You can easily give up on something you know from the start you won’t have. But something you could have had with just a small step will leave you regretful forever. Through my Mimories, I was told that the difference between me being happy and unhappy was paper-thin. Meet her, or don’t meet her - that difference was the divide between heaven and hell.

I thought I’d given up on ordinary happiness long ago. But having “it could’ve been like this” thrust before my eyes clear as day, I knew painfully well that I hadn’t given up one bit. I thought I had kept things nice and separate, but I was really just covering my desires with a lid to keep them out of sight.

Now I know. I wanted to be showered in unconditional love, but more than that, I think I wanted to be someone’s hero.

I’d wanted my memories from age 6 to age 15 erased so as to escape from this kind of emptiness.

I wanted to be overwhelmingly close to zero, so that there was no room to spare for “it could’ve been like this.” By doing that, I hoped to destroy every single fork in the path.

I didn’t have any appetite, but my empty stomach started to hurt again. I put out my cigarette, went to the kitchen, put the kettle on the stove, and aimlessly watched the burner flame while waiting for the water to heat up. After the kettle began to spout hot air, I turned the flame off, and while crouching down to get a cup ramen from under the sink, I discovered something on the floor.

It was a small piece of paper. I thought it was a receipt at first, but I lifted it up and found handwriting on it. A note addressed to me. There was no need to wonder who left it.

I wonder if she was humming to herself as she wrote this. Did she intend to leave me a message and go back to her own room because it seemed I’d be late coming home? But just as she finished writing, I returned. And when she boasted to me about her cooking that night, I forcefully pushed her over and stole back my key (presumably this is when the note fell to the floor), threw her meal in the trash right before her eyes, and ordered her to leave the room right away. That’s why the note had been left here.

This is what it said.

“I hope you’ll be well, Chihiro.”

I stood there unmoving with the paper in my hand.

Suddenly, I imagined the scene of not “her,” but “Touka Natsunagi” leaving behind the note.

Immediately, I felt a deep sadness that nearly stopped my

breath.

Joy, anger, affection, emptiness, guilt, loss, these feelings came and went all at once. They stormed in my chest and tore it apart, gouged it out, sliced it up, and stepped all over the little chunks. And then only naked sadness remained in the hole drilled in my heart.

Once I was done drinking, it felt anticlimactic.

On the table were two open packages and a glass. The glass was already empty, and I filled it with gin and drank. I couldn't find any warning suggesting not to mix alcohol with nanobot doses, so it was probably fine.

I had none of the regrets I was worried about, nor the sense of achievement I was hoping for. At best, there was a small sense of relief that I'd taken care of a troublesome task.

After drinking the gin, I fell down on the mat and waited for the Lethe to reach my brain. I hadn't necessarily overcome the fear of losing my memories, but my desire to forget this pain as soon as possible won out.

Soon, drowsiness enveloped me, and I lost consciousness with a sensation like sinking.

I heard something hard hit the floor.

After waking up, I had to think if I'd heard that sound in a dream or in reality.

Probably reality, I decided.

Then where did it come from?

The neighboring room.

I listened closely. The typhoon had passed its peak, but there

was still a whistling sound of wind coming from the gap in the window. There were no noises from the other room. I put my ear to the thin wall, closed my eyes, and focused on my hearing. Sure enough, all I could hear was the wind.

Gradually, the wind started to sound like a person's breathing. The sound was familiar to me. It was the breathing of someone having an asthma attack. The way Touka breathed when she collapsed. ...It seemed I hadn't forgotten about Touka Natsunagi yet. How much time had passed since I fell asleep? Surely I could expect the Lethe to have taken effect around now. I refused to believe I had been sent the wrong nanobots once again. Maybe it actually was bad that I took alcohol with it.

As a test, I listed the things I remembered about Touka Natsunagi. Long hair, pale skin, friendly smile, delicate body, five kisses, Firefly's Light, the class relay, the study and records, the ghost in the window, her face all blue, her chest contracting strangely as she breathed, her whistling breath, her inhaler lying on the floor,

"The doctor thinks it might be changes in air pressure."

plain white pajamas, neck and skinny arms sticking out,

"I mean, that typhoon was approaching, right? Apparently that made the pressure drop fast, so I had that attack."

Hadn't she had an attack and collapsed?

Hadn't the low air pressure made her asthma worse?

Hadn't she been crawling on the floor, unable to move?

I'm mixing up memories and Mimories again. I was aware of that. Yes, Touka Natsunagi was afflicted with serious asthma, but the woman in the room over was a different person from Touka Natsunagi. That girl Touka Natsunagi doesn't exist in the first place.

Hadn’t I confirmed that by meeting Nozomi Kirimoto? Her name wasn’t even in the yearbook.

Yet however many logical arguments I offered up, my body wouldn’t be satisfied. My heart beat faster, feeling like it might soon burst. My vision shook, my fingers were numb, my muscles twitched. I forgot how to breathe momentarily, so I hurriedly took a deep breath.

That was my limit. I went out barefoot into the hallway wet with rain. Fingers trembling, I rang the doorbell of the neighboring room. No response. I kept ringing every few seconds. No response. I took my phone out of my pocket and called her. No response. I knocked furiously on the door. I kept knocking.

No response.

“Touka!”

Before I knew it, I was shouting her name.

There was no response.

For a while, I hung my head with my hands against the door. The blowing rain had gotten me soaked without me realizing. Soon, the sound of wind stopped, and that calmed me down a bit too. I suddenly began to get embarrassed of my actions.

There being no response meant that she was out. That was all. What sounded like her asthmatic breathing was the wind coming through the window, and the sound like someone collapsing was the wind knocking something over. Maybe she had left with the window still open.

I laughed self-derisively and produced a lighter and cigarette from my pocket. I sat in the rainwater in the hallway and filled my lungs with smoke, breathing it out five seconds later. Then I leaned on the wall and closed my eyes.

I no longer cared about why the Lethe hadn't taken effect. I just wanted to see Touka's face now. Even if I knew how foolish it was, I wanted to feel the relief of knowing she was safe.

Behind my eyelids, I felt sunlight.

She must have disguised her footsteps among the sound of rain dripping from the gutter.

I heard a laugh that split the difference between "ehehe" and "ahaha" very close by.

It wasn't a hallucination or something misheard.

When I opened my eyes, Touka was leaning down and looking at my face.

My understanding couldn't keep up.

"You thought I'd gone away?"

With that, she sat down beside me.

"...Or did you think I'd had an asthma attack and couldn't move?"

I couldn't muster the effort to respond.

I was too busy trying to hide my relief.

"...How long have you been here?"

"Ever since you were knocking on the door, Chihiro."

She scooted close to me, coming within breathing distance.

"You called me Touka again."

"You must've misheard."

"Hmm, so I just misheard..." She purposefully widened her eyes. "Then what did you actually say?"

When I responded with silence, Touka snickered.

"You swapped the Lethe with fakes, didn't you?", I questioned.

"Yeah," she confirmed without fear. "After all, I didn't want to

be forgotten, and I didn't want you to forget."

I was too stunned to get a word out.

"Can I ask another question?"

"What?"

"Why did you just hurry to put out your cigarette?'

I looked at my hand. At some point, I'd started to crumple up the end of my cigarette.

It was a completely unconscious action.

Her eyes narrowed happily.

"You remembered I didn't like cigarettes, didn't you?"

"...It was a coincidence."

A pitiful excuse.

I didn't realize until she pointed it out, but I'd never once smoked in front of her.

Was it just because she was a girl that I spared her?

No way.

I could try to deny it all I wanted, but I had subconsciously accepted this woman as Touka Natsunagi.

"It's okay. I'm all better now. I don't really mind the smell of cigarettes, either."

Touka softly leaned on my shoulder. Just like when we sat together and listened to records in the study.

And she whispered into my ear.

"Relax. I won't just suddenly disappear."

*

That night, I tasted Touka's cooking for the first time.

All I could say was that it was delicious.

Touka had her chin in her hands with her elbows on the table, looking at me with upturned eyes awaiting my opinion, and I asked her.

“Why would you do all this for me?”

She responded with an answer that didn’t amount to an answer.

“I’m doing all this because I want to do all this.”

I sighed.

“Basically, as far as targets for scams go, I can’t imagine I’m a very valuable one.”

“Hmm,” Touka said. “I mean, that was the promise.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, promise.”

She affirmed it with a self-satisfied smile. And then she spoke with a tone I couldn’t place as joking or serious.

“That’s why I intend to devote myself to you, Chihiro.”

I went over my Mimories, but the word “promise” rang no bells. Precisely because all her statements prior had neatly aligned with my Mimories, that inconsistency left a little bit of stiffness in my heart.

Chapter 6: Heroine

Nightmares are kind. I often have nightmares. They always follow roughly the same outline.

For instance, there's someone precious to me in the dream. A girl my age. The dream begins with me losing sight of her.

I keep searching for her. She'd just been there a second ago. She was holding my hand, I was sure of it. She was smiling right beside me. The second I looked away, the second I let go, she'd vanished like mist.

Where in the world had she gone?

I ask someone nearby. Do you know []? (Even I'm not able to hear the name.) She's someone important to me. And the person responds. I don't know any []. Who are you talking about? As if you have anyone important to you. How can she disappear or anything if she didn't exist in the first place?

That can't be right, she was definitely right here, I argue back. But immediately after, I realize I can't remember the girl's name. Nor other things. I can no longer remember what her face was like, what her voice was like, how she held my hand, nothing.

I'm left with nothing except the feeling that I'm losing something very precious. Soon, even that feeling becomes hazy and slips through my fingers, and after a blank instant, everything disappears, leaving only a sense of loss.

There's also the opposite type. It might be my parents' house or a school classroom. People are looking at me with suspicion. Who is this guy, why is he here?, they all say. I hastily try to give my name. But the words don't come out right. I can't remember my own name. When I take my time and finally wring something out, it

sounds like the name of a total stranger, even to me. The others say they don't know such a person, too.

Then, someone whispers in my ear. [], you're a person who doesn't exist. Just like the three daughters your mother got by using Angel, you're merely a Substite born of memory alteration in someone's brain.

Every kind of foundation starts to disappear. I lose the ground I'm standing on, and tumble down endlessly.

Though I acted as if it didn't bother me, the truth of my mother abandoning me, memories and all, must have continued to cast a dark shadow on my mind.

When I wake up from a nightmare, reality feels like such a preferable place. Compared to those worlds, this world could still have hope. Nightmares would safely torment me and make my eyes see the virtue in reality (albeit only for a matter of minutes). In that way, nightmares are kind.

What should truly be feared are happy dreams. Those completely tear the value of reality away from you. When dreams are gorgeously colored, it takes just that much paint away from reality. When you wake up, you're reminded of the grayness of your life. You feel the absence of happiness more strongly than ever. Because the happiness in a dream doesn't even give you an illusion, it's just happiness completely unconnected to my real self.

Very rarely, in a happy dream, I'm able to realize I'm in a dream. When that happens, I close my eyes and cover my ears, and pray to return to reality as soon as possible. If I felt like it, I could probably become the king of dreamland and do whatever I pleased, but I don't. Because I know all too well that the better I feel in this world, the more miserable I'll feel in that world.

In the nightmare, the girl I lost sight of is suddenly beside me. She stares at me head-on and says, “Why would you do that?” She cocks her head to the side. “If you just asked for it, I could give you anything you want.” Even if I close my eyes and cover my ears, I can still clearly sense her appearance and voice. In a dream, it’s possible to see things with your eyes closed and hear things with your ears covered.

It’s because I’m a resident of the real world, I reply without speaking. If I want to keep living there, I need to keep as many paints there as I can manage. So I can’t be wasting color here for you.

She smiles sadly. Just the mere rendering of her smile consumes a huge amount of resources. And when I wake up, the world is much more faded than before I went to sleep. The voice of the girl in the dream clings to my eardrums. If you just asked for it, I could give you anything you want.

That’s why I fear happy dreams. I feared that one happy dream named Touka Natsunagi that came floating down in the summer when I was 20. I hid in a mean and distrustful shell, only thinking of my own protection. I couldn’t make any attempt to guess at her circumstances.

Thanks to this, I would come to forever regret the way I spent this summer. Why couldn’t I believe what she said? Why couldn’t I be honest with my feelings? Why couldn’t I have been kinder to her?

She cried by herself every night.

The hand she extended was a hand of salvation, and a hand seeking salvation.

People say it’s not worth crying over spilt milk. It’s pointless to grieve over what you’ve lost; just forget it, they say. But I’ve come to see that attitude as lacking respect toward what’s passed and what was lost. I’ve come to think it’s akin to kicking up dirt at that premonition of happiness that once gently smiled at you.

*

“Certainly, you’re doing a good job.”

When Touka came to my room the next morning and started watching TV as if it was normal, I spoke to her.

She craned her neck with a sleepy look.

“What do you mean?”

After she saw the embarrassment of me desperately crying Touka’s name last night, it seemed there was no point in trying to keep up appearances for her. So I spoke honestly.

“I mean you’re a really good actor. You’re answering my latent desires superbly. Even just knowing the contents of my Mimories and personal record, it takes serious talent to behave with such perfection. I’m on the verge of hallucinating that a girl named Touka Natsunagi actually existed.”

“Right, right?”

She cheerfully nodded again and again. Then very casually -

“I mean, I did practice a ton.”

She said something outrageous.

It didn’t seem like she was just sleepy and let it slip, either.

“You admit you’re lying?”, I asked.

“Well, no... Like I’ve said over and over, Chihiro, I’m your childhood friend. But...” She put a hand to her mouth and thought,

then raised her index finger. “Okay, you know the story of The North Wind and the Sun, right?”

Of course, even I’d heard of that. “What about it?”

“If I just admitted to you that I’ve actually been lying, I thought it might make things easier for you too, Chihiro. Basically, I’m a liar, and you have no choice but to go along with me to learn the meaning of my lies. And knowing my lies are being seen through, I still carry out an obvious act to accomplish my plan. If our relationship is clearly stated like that, then you can relax and be with me, right?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Since you’re being difficult, Chihiro, I’m giving you an excuse to fawn over me.”

I snorted. “Are you stupid?”

She wasn’t stupid. Skipping to the conclusion, her change in direction was a huge success. By granting me the excuse of “she’s not fooling me, I’ve seen through her lies and am only going along with her act to expose her,” I sunk hilariously deep.

What I needed was an indulgence. By dropping the act of a pure and innocent childhood friend and deliberately acting like a scammer, Touka Natsunagi trivially destroyed my mental blockades. As if the shepherd boy who kept lying and lost all trust made use of a self-referential paradox to convince the villagers a wolf was attacking.

Thinking about it, it was the same approach I’d used to lower Nozomi Kirimoto’s defenses. To put someone who suspects you’re lying at ease, it’s better to admit to some harmless lies than to insist you’re honest. The same way you would write about insignificant defects on cheap merchandise to convince buyers.

“Look, this outfit is pretty childhood-friend-like, right?”

She’d put on a bright white one piece that showed her shoulders. In my mind’s eye, her appearance bore a close resemblance to that of a gasping sunflower girl.

“For someone like yourself with an immature yet defensive mind, I believe such plain and simple clothes and some affable words would remove your wariness.”

“Boy, that hurts.”

“But you do like it, don’t you, Chihiro?’

“Yeah. I do.”

I casually admitted it. Bluffing in front of someone who understood my inner workings so intimately was useless.

“Is it cute?”

“It’s cute,” I carelessly repeated.

“Get your heart throbbing?”

“Heart’s throbbing,” I mechanically repeated.

“But you won’t be honest?”

“That’s right.”

You don’t have to hold back, she told me, and spontaneously smiled.

She misunderstands. I’m not holding back. The Touka Natsunagi in front of me is certainly charming, but I’m seeing the 7-year old Touka Natsunagi and the 9-year old Touka Natsunagi and the 15-year old Touka Natsunagi overlapping with her. Those visions don’t perfectly synchronize with 20-year-old Touka Natsunagi, and occasionally there’s some kind of lag, making their faces partially peek out from her body. When I see that, it feels entirely inappropriate, or perhaps misdirected, to see her as a target of my desires.

*

It wasn't all bad for me. With Touka Natsunagi's lies having been cast off, our communication became far smoother, and we could cut into the core of things without tedious formalities.

"I've forgotten a part of my past, but I don't seem like I'm ready yet, so you can't tell me the truth." I was paraphrasing her words from half a month ago. "That's what you're going with, right?"

"That's what I'm going with." Touka nodded repeatedly.

"How might I know when I'm ready?"

"Let's see now..."

She put on an unsure appearance, but she probably had the answer ready long ago. By the time she first met me, even.

"You'll have to put me at ease."

She put her left hand to her chest. As if checking her lungs - a descriptor that came to mind no doubt because of my Mimories.

"If you can prove you won't turn to despair and can keep living no matter what you learn, then I can tell you everything you want to know."

She promptly followed it up with a means of providing that proof.

"So, starting today, I'll have you live according to some rules I've devised."

"Rules?"

"Yes. Living regulations," she rephrased. "Chihiro, how long does your summer break last?"

"Until September 20th or so, I think."

“If you can avoid breaking the rules until that day, I’ll give you a passing grade.”

She produced a memo pad from somewhere and wrote several rules with a felt-tip pen. The first line said “How to Spend Summer Break.”

I remembered: in grade school, they handed out printouts just like this before summer break. Indeed, most of the rules she wrote were lifted straight from them, like “live a well-regulated life,” “have a balanced diet,” “go outside and exercise regularly,” “be careful not to get injured or sick,” “help out around the house.” Among those idyllic rules were two that gave off a strange color: “no drinking alcohol,” and “no smoking cigarettes.”

“I can’t drink a single drop?”

“Nope. No good.”

“I can’t smoke a single cigarette?”

“Nope. No good.”

“That’s hard.”

“I’ll keep watch on you. To make sure you don’t get sneaky.”

With that, Touka lightly yawned. It was 10 PM, but she was already in pajamas and looked sleepy. She was probably living healthily like a grade-schooler.

After yawning again, she said “I should sleep soon” and stood up.

“I’ll come wake you up tomorrow. Good night.”

Giving me a wave around shoulder-level, she returned to her room.

“Good night,” huh.

Come to think of it, my parents were never the type to say “good morning” or “good night.” “I’m heading out,” “I’m home,”

“have a nice day,” “welcome home” - all these phrases were fictitious to me. My childhood self found the reality that a normal family exchanged such greetings on a daily basis hard to swallow.

I tried quietly mumbling “good night” to try it out.

It has a tender sound to it, I thought.

And that’s how I rang in the beginning of her and my summer break.

*

For a while afterward, the days proceeded more or less as follows.

6:00 AM

Every morning, Touka came to wake me up. Not by shaking my shoulders or slapping me, but by squatting next to me and whispering “I’ll prank you if you don’t wake up.” Replicating a scene from my Mimories, no doubt.

On the fifth day, I tried pretending that I was so sleepy I didn’t hear her. Turns out she seemingly didn’t have a concrete idea of what her “prank” would be, so she hesitated for a few minutes. Once she finally made up her mind, she timidly snuck under the covers. When I continued to feign sleep, she got out of the bed as if unable to take the tension and sighed. Was she more innocent than I thought, or was that her act? When I sat up behaving like I’d only just woken up, she laughed “Good morning” with a silly smile.

7:00 AM

We ate the breakfast she’d made together. Though she was a

skilled cook, many of her breakfast dishes were simple. Even so, they really whet my appetite. Maybe the daily exercise (see below) was part of it. I'd say it was more Japanese-style meals than not, and I noticed a strange fixation on miso soup. She put a stake in my cup ramen habit, telling me to "put it aside for a while." It wasn't like I ate them because I necessarily liked them, so I obeyed.

8:00 AM

While I was washing my face and brushing my teeth, Touka took care of the washing. I didn't have much to do, so I wanted to go back to sleep, but she was always there watching me, and if I looked sleepy, she'd pull my ear. Reluctantly, I'd study or read a book I checked out from the library. The flow of time felt so slow in the morning, and it wasn't uncommon that I'd think "it must be noon by now, right?", look up, and see it was still before 10. Maybe the heat from sunlight causes time to expand. Every time I looked at the clock, I was bowled over by the length of a single day.

10:30 AM

Cleaning and laundry time. When the room was clean and there wasn't any laundry piled up, we listened to music on a music player Touka brought. Sure enough, it was the same type as the one used in my Mimories, and the records were all the same too. Listening to music from a bygone era made me feel sleepy, like sitting in the middle of a quiet field. If I fell asleep in this particular case, Touka wouldn't try to wake me. In fact, she would sometimes nod off too. And she'd lean on my shoulder without a hint of imprudence. Through the rhythm of her breathing, I came to truly feel the presence of another living being.

12:00 PM

We ate the lunch she'd made together. They were always huge meals. When I asked her why they were so large, she said "I want to fatten you up so I can eat you, Chihiro," and laughed to herself. Meanwhile, she herself only ate half as much as I did. After lunch, we drank roasted green tea and spaced out for a while. From the open window, I could hear the voices of children playing in the nearby park.

1:00 PM

When I had work, I left the apartment at this time. Touka also went back to her own room. I didn't have the slightest guess what she was up to, from then until I came back. She might be perfecting her scamming strategy, she might be watering morning glories on her veranda, she might shed the skin of "Touka Natsunagi" and fan herself while letting it dry in the shade. She could be doing anything at all and it wouldn't surprise me.

When I didn't have work, I exercised. To be specific, I pedaled a bike down the streets with Touka sitting on the back, taking us to the neighboring town. (She'd had a cushion installed on the luggage carrier. Well-prepared as always.) Once again, she was trying to recreate part of my Mimories.

Her "How to Spend Summer Break" list did mention "regular exercise," but there was no doubt about it, this exercise was excessive. Because we picked routes without many people so nobody spotted us double-riding, there were many rough roads. I had to keep from picking up speed on downhill slopes, what with Touka sitting on the back. And being extra-careful to not shift my

center of balance consumed entirely too much of my stamina. On top of all that, every time we lost balance, Touka clung to me, and I was put beside myself with worry. The feeling of her sticking to my sweat-drenched body shook up my heart every time. Either because she knew my mental fatigue or because she didn't, she giggled every time she clung to me.

By the time we arrived at the park, which is where we turned around and went back home, my legs were totally numb. When I got off the bike, I couldn't walk properly for a while. I drank barley tea from a cold canteen, taking a 20-minute rest on a bench near the river. There was an ancient hospital on the other bank, and sometimes I'd see figures pass by the windows. Possibly interested in what was going on inside, Touka always leaned over the fence to look at the hospital every time we were there.

After resting, we got back on the bike, and I cleared my mind and just pedaled. The sun would be starting to set by the time we neared the apartment. The scenery along the way was monotonous, just power poles and power lines darkened by the westering sun; it felt like the resolution of the world had been downgraded several levels. The evening winds that sometimes blew were comfortable.

6:30 PM

After washing off my sweat in the shower, we went to the nearby supermarket to buy food. Being unilaterally indebted to her annoyed me, so I decided to pay for this part myself. Touka was slightly reluctant, but readily backed down: "If that's what you want to do, Chihiro, then do it." While tossing groceries into the shopping basket I held, she said "Doing this makes us seem like newlyweds,"

and laughed with feigned naiveté.

By the time we left the market, I was unable to think of anything but dinner thanks to my empty stomach. That was something I couldn't have imagined before. On the little riverside path, where security lights on their way out nervously flickered, I heard the echoing cries of many a summer insect. Touka would whimsically take the shopping bag from my hand, and wrap her arm around my now-free arm. Said arm was shockingly slender, soft, and chilly.

Once, I bumped into Emori in the middle of such a situation. Seeing Touka holding my hand, he was at a loss for words, looked at me with surprise, then brought his attention back to Touka. Then he blinked as if noticing something, drew near Touka, and impudently stared at her face.

Touka faltered and asked "Er, what is it?", but Emori didn't reply. He bored a hole through her face with his gaze, started to say "Hey, you, I swear I've...", but then thought better of it and shut his mouth. Then he went back to his usual aloof self, forcefully slapped my shoulder, and told me "Well, hope you do good" before leaving. Did he mean do good in exposing the identity of the scammer, or do good in getting along with her? I was at a loss. Then Touka lightly hit my shoulder. "You heard him. Let's do good," she whispered in my ear.

7:30 PM

We ate the dinner she'd made together. Many of her dinners were elaborate. Lots of the meals felt like they'd pair well with beer, so sometimes I thought "might as well try" and told her I wanted to drink. When I did this, she let me drink cold amazake. It

was pretty tasty, all told.

9:00 PM

This is when I would have previously been in my best condition, yet I was always unbearably sleepy now. At the end of each day, Touka would conduct an evaluation. She'd hung a calendar on the wall with boxes to write the day of the week, the weather, and the events of the day - designed exactly like the "one-line diaries" you're given for summer break in grade school - and she would put a stamp on that day. It meant I'd obeyed the schedule she set out. Sort of like a stamp card.

Then she'd write the events of the day in the "what happened" section. They were utterly trivial things like "Chihiro got suntanned" or "Chihiro asked for seconds, and thirds." I think the stuff grade-schoolers write would be more worth reading.

Then she'd say "good night" and leave the room. I took a quick shower, collapsed into bed, and drifted off in under ten minutes. A healthy lifestyle, like a ten-year-old kid. When twenty-year-olds like us did it, it felt unhealthy instead.

But I would be lying to say it wasn't fun.

*

The "one-line diary" went on for 20 days.

August 23rd, Cloudy. Chihiro was fidgety.

August 24th, Cloudy. Chihiro pretended he wasn't fidgety.

August 25rd, Sunny. Chihiro was about to drink, so I scolded him.

August 26th, Sunny. Chihiro asked for seconds, and thirds.

August 27th, Rainy. Chihiro wouldn't wake up, so I played a prank on him.

August 28th, Cloudy. Some children teased us for riding together.

August 29th, Sunny. Got very tired.

August 30th, Cloudy. Today was a wonderfully nothing-filled day.

August 31st, Sunny. Chihiro, you're silly.

September 1st, Sunny. Chihiro got suntanned.

September 2nd, Cloudy. Apparently even Chihiro has friends.

September 3rd, Sunny. ~~Chihiro got embarrassed.~~ Touka entrapped me.

September 4th, Sunny. Just a little longer.

September 5th, Sunny. Shockingly, Chihiro made a meal.

September 6th, Sunny. The fireworks were pretty.

September 7th, Sunny. Chihiro was being unpleasant.

September 8th, Cloudy. Chihiro apologized to me.

September 9th, Cloudy. Chihiro was kind.

September 10th, Rainy. I was happy.

September 11th, Clear. Touka left.

*

“Hey, you want to kiss?”

September 10th. The forecast predicted rain in the evening, but the festival was held as planned. A little festival, based around the local shrine.

That day, we canceled our usual bike trip and lazed around in the room during the day. And when the sun started to descend, we left the apartment for the shrine. Luckily, it didn’t seem it would rain for a while yet.

Touka was wearing a deep-blue yukata. Needless to say, it had the exact same fireworks pattern as the one she wore at age 15 in my Mimories. She naturally also wore the red chrysanthemums in her hair. The one difference from that day was that she had me wear a shijira-ori yukata she’d prepared. It was the first time in my life I’d gone outside wearing a yukata, so I was restless on the way.

Touka visited a photo studio in the shopping district and

bought a disposable film camera, then took photos of me from every distance and angle, her geta sandals clopping restlessly. I asked her why she wasn't using the digital camera on her phone, and she gave me the inexplicable answer of "They're evidence photos." There was probably no deep meaning beyond her just wanting to say that, I supposed.

My eyes had adjusted to the dark evening, so the strobe light dazed my eyes.

After arriving at the plaza, we first did a tour of the stands. Then each of us bought what we wanted to from them, and looked for a place to plop down. Contrary to the small scale of the festival, there were many people there, so we went around to the back of the main shrine building, and sat together in the middle of the stairs connecting the shrine to the elementary school. The only lighting was a security lamp at the top of the stairs, and its light hardly reached us.

Touka's face in the dim light was, as if by some mistake, beautiful. It really probably was some kind of mistake. Her looks were above-average, sure, but it was a beauty totally unlike the elegant kind that made passersby turn their heads. Maybe I'd describe it as a kind of beauty that has no real use, like a harmonica secretly sleeping in the back of a pantry. The only reason it struck my heart so hard was because of the many filters the Mimories put over my eyes.

And then, like it or not, I remembered. There was no question, Touka had intentionally chosen this place. So I knew perfectly well what line would come from her lips the next time they opened.

After waiting for the right moment, Touka spoke.

"Hey, you want to kiss?"

15-year-old Touka and 20-year-old Touka overlapped.

“Come on, let’s test if I’m really just a scammer or not,” Touka said in the same flippant tone as back then. “Maybe you’ll be surprised to find lost memories reviving.”

“If that were enough to revive them, they would’ve revived ages ago,” I replied in the same tone.

“Come on, come on. If you don’t pretend to be fooled, things can’t move forward.”

Touka faced me and closed her eyes.

This is strictly just an act. A necessary price to reveal the truth. And I mean, a kiss isn’t that big a deal. After putting up all those defenses, I humbly locked lips with her.

After our lips parted, we faced each other again, but didn’t try to act as if it were nothing.

“How was it?” - she asked this time. “Feel anything?”

“Sure did,” I said, and left it at that.

“Ohh.” Touka put her hands together and her eyes sparkled. “So you’re honest now, Chihiro.”

“Figured there’s no point in lying.”

“I really felt my heart pounding too. It’s my first kiss in five years, after all.”

“Is that what you’re going with?”

“That is what I’m going with. I’ve been living alone since we parted five years ago, haven’t I?”

“A model example of a childhood friend.”

“Aren’t I just?”

Then there was a long pause. We ate the food we bought at the stands in silence.

When I stood up to throw away my trash, she suddenly broke

the silence.

“Hey, Chihiro.”

“What?”

“Relax. When this summer ends, I’ll vanish from your sight.”

It was an unexpected proclamation.

I thought it was one those Touka-style roundabout jokes.

But her expression and tone told me she was dead serious.

“All we have left now is this summer. So I’d be happy if you kept going along with this lie until then.”

Then, with a level of modesty rare for her, she leaned on my shoulder.

“What was your objective, anyway?”

I figured she’d dodge the question.

But her answer was unusually sincere.

“You’ll know eventually. It’s a pretty complex objective, but I think you can manage to get the gist of it.”

It rained two hours later than the forecast. When it did come, it was a definitively large storm. Not wishing to run home in our yukatas, we decided to take shelter at a nearby bus stop. It was the sort of situation that seemed planned somehow, but not even she could manipulate the weather. There was a discarded umbrella at the bus stop, but it was only the remnants of one ruined by the typhoon last month.

Unlike the rain in August, the rain in September carried clear malice. Completely soaked before we could make it under a roof, the rainwater slowly sapped our body heat.

Touka was holding her thin body, trying to endure the cold. One “Chihiro Amagai” inside me wanted to hold her tight and warm

her up.

But I stuffed down that feeling. If I obeyed his voice here, I felt the real me and the me in my Mimories would switch places and never be able to go back.

Instead, I asked:

“Are you cold?”

She looked at me for a few seconds, then down again.

“Yeah. But I feel like you’ll warm me up, Chihiro.”

She had a sweet, inviting voice.

If the rain hadn’t cooled my head, I probably wouldn’t be able to resist it.

“...Sorry, but I can’t take it that far.”

Then she laughed cynically.

Her laugh was the only dry thing in the rain-soaked bus stop.

She spoke provocatively.

“Why? Are you afraid to get serious?”

“Yeah. I’m scared.”

Silence fell.

I counted ten rain drips from the ceiling.

She drew in a faint breath.

Then she showed me the slightest peek at the face under her mask.

“If only you’d give in and be fooled.”

So she said.

“If you just asked for it, I could give you anything you want.”

Her voice trembled slightly.

“I know everything you want,” she said.

Right you are, I thought.

I wanted to be fooled by her lies, if I could. I wanted to soak in

the gentle story told by her and the Mimories. Whether a dream or a Mimory or an illusion, I wanted to love her blindly, and her blindly love me.

She could give me anything I desired.

And yet.

That's why, right there.

I swallowed the words threatening to overflow, and put it all into just three.

"I hate lies."

I told her this, looking at her straight on.

Her expression wasn't shaken one bit.

Her eyes seemed to be looking at me, at yet at nothing.

She started to laugh innocently like always,

and then something inside her broke down.

The line going down her cheek was most likely not a raindrop.

"I love lies."

Then she turned her back to me to hide her tears.

The rain continued for nearly an hour after. For that time, we sat back to back, sharing a faint warmth.

That was the limit for me, reality's Chihiro Amagai.

When the rain stopped, we went back to the apartment without a word. And we waited in our respective rooms for our respective mornings.

The next day, she had vanished. The spare key was beside my bed. She must've returned it while I was asleep.

In the "one-line diary," she had left her own kind of farewell message for September 10th.

September 10th, Rainy. I was happy.

In the day next to it, I wrote this.

September 11th, Clear. Touka left.

And that's how we signaled the end of her and my short summer break.

*

"Even now, Chihiro, you're my hero."

Touka spoke this to me frankly the day before she moved away.

The study was now an empty room, but we were still huddled up in the corner.

"Chihiro, you led me out from a dark place," she continued. "I didn't have friends, but you were always there with me, and you saved me again and again when I had attacks. If you weren't there, I might have just despaired and died a long time ago."

How overdramatic, I laughed.

It's the truth, she laughed back.

"That's why, if anything happens to you someday, I'm going to be your hero, Chihiro."

"Shouldn't it be "heroine" for a girl?"

"Oh, right."

She thought for a bit, then smiled softly.

"Okay, then I'm going to be your heroine, Chihiro."

When she put it like that, the meaning sounded a little different.

Chapter 7: Prayer

Following the rainstorm, the evening wind started to carry the smell of an autumn night. Cicadas halfway to the grave made dull buzzing sounds as they crawled around on the ground, and the sunflowers to the side of the road had their heads drooped like stray dogs, never to lift up again.

Summer was starting to end.

Freed of Touka, I drank gin by myself, I smoked by myself, I got meals by myself, and I drank gin by myself again. The life cycle she had built up for me over 20 days fell apart in just one. You can say it about anything: building it up is hard, but demolishing it is shockingly easy.

That said, my eating habits had gotten a bit better. I bought ingredients from the supermarket every evening, and took the time to cook them. I didn't grow to hate cup ramen or anything. But cooking was just the thing to keep me from boredom. While I was in the kitchen doing work that took concentration, I didn't have to think about extraneous nonsense.

I didn't have any experience cooking for myself, but I naturally picked up the procedures while watching Touka do it. I relied on my memory to replicate each of the dishes she'd made. After my meal, I washed and put away the utensils, then drank gin again. When I had nothing to do, I listened to music on the record player she left behind. The old music that just felt tedious when we listened to it together, to my surprise, wasn't so bad when I listened to it alone. Right now, some simple and slow music was just what I was looking for.

On the fourth day, Emori contacted me. I woke up from a nap

and checked the voice mails on my phone.

I played it without even thinking about it.

“I’ve figured out who Touka Natsunagi is. I’ll contact you again later.”

I put the phone down by my bed and closed my eyes.

Two hours later, I got a phone call.

I showered for the first time in two days, put on new clothes, and headed for the children’s park.

*

“You want the long explanation, or the short explanation?”

That’s how Emori broke the ice. I thought for just five seconds, then said “the long one, please.” While part of me did want to hear the short explanation first to learn the truth, I would probably be asking for details afterward either way. I would try to get the most amount of information I could, in an attempt to come to my own conclusion that might differ from his. In that case, I thought, I should get the long explanation first.

“Well then, we’re going to have to go a ways back.” Then Emori had a bit of a hesitant pause. “Why was it not you, an involved party, but me, a third party, who could see through to the truth about Touka Natsunagi? To explain the logic there, I’m gonna have to talk about a time I was seriously considering buying Mimories. And to explain why I was considering buying Mimories, I’m gonna need to go into some of my personal life. It’s not the happiest stuff, and not the kind of stuff you want to talk about in public...”

He scratched the back of his neck and breathed out.

“Well, maybe it might not be so bad to open up about it to you, Amagai.”

I nodded and urged him to continue.

“Take a look at this.”

With that, he showed me something: a dirty school notebook.

“It’s a notebook from middle school,” he explained. “Turn it over.”

On the back of the notebook was a student identification, with a photo of middle-school age Emori.

That said, if I had been shown this photo without any context, I probably wouldn’t realize it was Emori.

That’s how different he was in this photo compared to him now.

To put it bluntly: he was ugly.

“Awful, right?”, Emori said. Not self-derisively, but like he was spitting something out. “I had a miserable childhood. None of the boys or girls wanted to be around me. I was teased by older students all the time, and even younger students made fun of me. Hell, even the teachers were reluctant to deal with me. I was just praying for time to pass quicker in the corner of the classroom, day after day.”

I compared the person in the photo with the one before my eyes. Sure, there were faint similarities between them. But said similarities were on the level of “tofu and natto are made from the same base ingredients”; you could find them if you tried, just as much as you could find similarities between any two total strangers.

“I made up my mind to change myself in spring, when I was 18. March 9th, four years ago,” he continued. “When I was walking home alone from graduation, this couple walked in front of me.

They were wearing the same uniforms as me and holding diplomas, so I knew they were graduates from my school. In fact, then I noticed the girl was one of my classmates. The one person in class who would always say hi to me every day. Secretly, I felt something toward her, though it could barely even be called a crush. I knew I wasn't the kind of guy who could get with her, so I didn't make any moves, but during class or at lunch, I'd sneak peeks at her when I got the chance."

He took the notebook from my hand and put it back in his pocket. I wondered if he periodically looked at that notebook to remind himself of his past self. Like taking a bitter medicine.

"You know why I didn't notice she was one half of that couple right away? 'Cause she wore a totally different expression walking with her boyfriend than anything I saw in the classroom. Ahh, so that's how she smiles when she's actually happy, I thought. She was a pretty girl, so I wasn't really shocked she had a boyfriend. I hadn't gotten my hopes up that she was mine or anything, so I couldn't possibly get jealous now. I'd already estimated myself to be at rock bottom, so nothing could make me more miserable from there. I just thought, "she looks happy.""

He glanced at me, as if to say "you probably know how that feels."

Of course I do, my eyes responded.

"But for some reason... while I was getting ready to live my new life, I was constantly remembering what I saw then, and getting my heart thrown into disarray. While I was packing, while I was going between the dump and my home, while I was buying living supplies, I kept ruminating over the scene I saw on the way home from graduation. After I was done preparing for my move, I

lay down in my empty room with arms and legs outstretched, and thought long and hard about what the hell I was doing to myself. And that night, I made a resolution to myself: I'll start over from scratch."

As if waiting for the meaning of those words to soak into me, he paused for a few seconds.

"Luckily, I didn't know a single person at my new school. I bumped up my original moving date and started living on my own. And then, I tried everything I could think of for the sake of my "rebirth." For a while, I hardly showed my face around college, 'cause I was working so hard on my body I nearly coughed up blood. I researched every night about how I should dress and act for people to like me, and put those things into practice in places with no ties to school. And I tampered with my face as much as you can without a scalpel being involved. Once I'd gotten enough confidence, I started to show up to class in earnest. I made tons of friends and attractive partners in no time, but I still didn't work any less on self-improvement. In fact, seeing visible results for my efforts lit the fires of ambition in me. I put tons of effort, like I was possessed, into appearance and everything else. By a year later, I had girls fawning on me without me even sneezing in their direction."

Then he flashed me a smile, as if firing off a test shot. It was a smile that would make any girl who came to college full of dreams instantly fall in love.

"It was like the world revolved around me. After that, I started feeling eager to get back my lost childhood. Wanting to get revenge on both my past self and those who wouldn't give him the time of day, I slept with loads of young, pretty girls. Like some noble from

the Middle Ages who bathed in the blood of young girls to keep up their good looks. I thought that would save the other me inside me. I thought I'd be able to give salvation to the kid who could only sit in the corner of the classroom and enviously watch from afar as his classmates had childhoods."

At this point in the story, Emori finally took a sip of beer. It had probably gone warm a while ago, so he scrunched up his face and looked at the label on the can. Then he poured out the contents on the ground and started smoking, using the can as an ashtray. I lit a cigarette to match him.

"In my fourth year of college, in summer, I finally came to my senses. And I had a revelation. I can struggle all I want, but it's impossible to get back a lost childhood. As it turns out, you can only have the experiences a 15-year-old should have at 15, so if I didn't have them at that age, no fulfilling experiences after the fact can save the spirit of 15-year-old me. Took me too long to realize something so obvious. Everything felt futile then, and I gave up my womanizing. I deleted all my lady friends' contact info, no exceptions. I befriended you a little after that, Amagai. I guess at the time, I was looking for somebody who felt a similar emptiness."

Him saying that reminded me. The girls who visited Emori's room near-daily did stop showing up right around the time he and I got to know each other.

I never even stopped to think that those two phenomenons had a cause-and-effect relationship.

"I learned about Green Green at the end of summer - right around this timeframe." He finally spoke those words. Gradually, he was approaching the main topic. "It was the perfect product for a childhood-craving zombie like me. The wonder cure for an

unfulfilling childhood, which gives users memories of a beautiful one. I leapt for it right away. I tried to, anyway. I made it as far as making an appointment for counseling. This can save 12-year-old and 15-year-old me, I thought. But just before it came up, I rethought it and canceled."

I got a word in for the first time. "Why was that?"

His mouth warped as if in agony.

"What's more hollow than my most beautiful memories being someone else's fabrication?"

I nodded.

I felt I could now fully understand why this man had befriended me.

"I gave up purchasing Green Green, but my interest in Mimories themselves stuck around. In particular, I was really fascinated by the job of "Mimory engineer" I learned about while researching Mimories. I've had to confront my own memories way more than your average person. I felt like a person like me who has countless cases of "if only it'd been like this" in his past might just be suited to be a Mimory engineer. I gathered as much information as I could on that occupation. I think it was in the process of collecting that information that I learned about her. It took me a while to remember, being an article I just skimmed over nearly a year ago, but that's why I felt like I'd seen that girl you were walking with a few weeks ago, Amagai."

Emori showed me a news article on his phone. At the top was a date from three years ago.

The Genius 17-Year-Old Mimory Engineer

“The preface went a little long, but now for the conclusion,” Emori said. “Touka Natsunagi is a Mimory engineer. The Mimories about Touka Natsunagi in your head, Amagai, she probably made them herself.”

He scrolled the screen down and zoomed in on the photo below. A familiar face jumped out at me.

It was Touka Natsunagi’s smile that I hadn’t seen in four days.

*

Back at the apartment, I reread the article over and over. After doing that, I gathered information about her on the web.

Touka Natsunagi wasn’t her real name, but there was only the slightest difference between her real name and her alias. One of the consonants in her surname was different, and that was all. She probably thought this minimal disguise would be sufficient for me. Or maybe in the event she said her real name by mistake, she was making sure she could talk her way out of it.

At the time, she was the youngest Mimory engineer in history. She was hired as a Mimory engineer by a major clinic as young as 16, and worked on many Mimories while going through high school.

In just three years, she created over 50 years’ worth of Mimories. This was an absurd pace, regardless of her youth. And it wasn’t all quantity, but quality as well. Needless to say, she drew attention in the world of Mimory engineering as a rising star, but she sent in a resignation letter just before her 20th birthday and hadn’t been heard from since then. It made the local news, at least. People who were anticipating her work were left to despair. The Mimories she drew up were somehow fundamentally different

from those of other Mimory engineers; no one was able to imitate her.

She referred to that unparalleled difference as “prayer.”

In a short interview on a news site, Touka answered the reporter’s questions cautiously with basic and harmless words. The interviewer went through great lengths to try and get a childish reaction or some nefarious statement out of the 17-year-old prodigy, but the further forward he stepped, the deeper she retreated into her shell. So she responded with modest, safe, and boring answers.

There were only two questions at the end that were able to get her to speak her thoughts. The first was: “People say the Mimories you create are entirely different from what other Mimory engineers make. How would you concretely describe what that “difference” is?”

I guess I’d say “prayer.”

When the interviewer tried to dig deeper into what she meant by “prayer,” Touka gave a simple answer. “Basically, I mean earnestness.”

But in truth, it was probably something for which no word except “prayer” would work.

At least that’s how I felt.

The interviewer went on to ask her ultimate goal as a Mimory engineer. Touka answered this like so.

I want to make Mimories so powerful, they throw that person’s life into chaos.

And was I the test subject?

Had her aim been to throw my life into chaos through Mimories?

Had her smiles, and her tears, all just been an act to shake up my heart?

I guess I should be irritated. I guess I should be indignant about being used to feed her ego. One month ago, I probably would have been.

But that was impossible for me now. Only knowing the truth now was too late. Any attempt to cast negative feelings toward her would be firmly impeded by my memories of this summer break. It wasn't just "I can't hate her." I looked at this photo of 17-year-old Touka over and over, and every time, my heart was filled with yearning.

Strangely enough, 17-year-old Touka looked a bit older than the 20-year-old Touka I knew. In the photo, her eyes were slightly bleary, and the fact she wore a high school uniform felt out of place, even. It might have honestly fit present-day Touka better.

In fact, now that I was thinking about this, 20-year-old her was way too young. In the photo, she was passing as 20, and in the present, she was passing as 17.

What did this strange inversion mean? Had the photo just come out bad because she was nervous? Had quitting her job freed her from stress, making her look younger? Had she tried to get as close as possible to her appearance in the Mimories to help deceive me?

The 17-year-old Touka who gave the camera an awkward smile

looked like it could be a vision of herself from the near future.

My thoughts wouldn't stop racing. All I could rely on for sleepless nights was, you guessed it, alcohol. I poured the waters of forgetfulness into a glass, and got lost in an alley of gin with a ruin-like atmosphere.

My dad was also a lover of alcohol. There are drunks who drink to enjoy reality and those who drink to forget reality, and he was decisively the latter. If he didn't end up a Mimory addict, he'd probably have ended up a more dangerous alcohol addict. He seemed to bear subtle pain which no one would soothe, always looking like he was suffocating.

My sole objective in life was to never end up like my dad, yet maybe I did end up rather similar to my dad, just with a change in presentation. A life where I keep averting my eyes from anything inconvenient to me, the situation continues to worsen, and yet I keep looking away.

While gazing absentmindedly at the "one-line diary" hung on the wall, I realized my eyes were losing focus. I closed them, and found myself on a ship rocked by tall waves. I staggered over to the bathroom and emptied out my stomach. It had been a month since I last drank so much I threw up. It was that day I decided to drink the Lethe, couldn't do it, had a case of mistaken identity, drank in desperation, was kicked out of the bar, walked home to the apartment, and met her.

Touka Natsunagi.

There was just one thing that I was stuck on. On the last day, Touka told me this about her reason for acting like my childhood friend.

“You’ll know eventually. It’s a pretty complex objective, but I think you can manage to get the gist of it.”

But could you call “throwing that person’s life into chaos” a complex objective?

And did “I think you can manage to get the gist of it” imply that it was something the average person would find harder to figure out?

I can’t help but feel I’m overlooking something major.

If you just wanted to throw my life into chaos, there should have been countless other ways.

Just leaving the contents of the Green Green as-is, appearing before me as “a girl who resembles the childhood friend in the Mimories,” and putting on the act of a fateful encounter would surely have ensnared me, inviting little in the way of unnecessary doubt. It’s hard to imagine she lacked the ability to conceive of that.

And yet she appeared before me as the childhood friend in the Mimories herself. She purposefully chose an approach with low odds of success. Does that just go to show how confident she was in the influence of her Mimories?

It can’t just be that. She had to become the childhood friend I adored, and no one else. Until I could figure out the reason why that was, I wouldn’t be able to say I understood her true intentions.

My thoughts continued to race even more.

*

At some point, the sky had started to brighten. Even with the power of alcohol, I hadn’t been able to sleep a wink, and having drank beyond the recommended dosage, my body felt horribly

sluggish. My eyes were bleary, my head heavy, my throat hurt, and I was hungry, too.

I crawled out of bed. It was probably my empty stomach that kept sleep away, but the childhood friend who would make me breakfast was gone now. I checked the fridge, and it only had a few shreds of cabbage and some orange juice. When I drank the orange juice to the last drop, it only seemed to make my stomach worse. I gave up on sleeping, put on my sandals, and left the room in my sleepwear.

Just as I opened the door, something moved in the corner of my vision. While in the act of closing my door, I instinctively turned to it.

It was a girl. She looked anywhere from 17 to 20. She was dressed like she'd visited someone's funeral far away, then returned on the earliest train she could. Her limbs, faintly lit, were like a transparent white, and her long, soft black hair was blown up by the wind in the hall,

and time stopped.

An invisible nail fixed us in place, her in the pose of opening her door, and myself closing my door with the back of my hand.

As if we temporarily lost the concept of words, we looked at each other for a long time.

The first thing to resume movement was my mouth.

"...Touka?"

I spoke her name.

"...And who would you be?"

The girl had forgotten mine.

Chapter 8: Reprise

I have a childhood friend who I've never met. I've never seen his face. I've never heard him speak. I've never even touched him. Despite that, he feels close to me. I think fondly of him. And he's my salvation.

He doesn't exist. To be more precise, he exists only in my fantasy. He's a convenient illusion my oxygen-deprived brain created on long, sleepless nights. Yet this illusion began to steadily take on a more defined shape, and soon became an irreplaceable friend to me.

He has no name. Because if I gave him a name, it would only make it clearer that he doesn't exist. I simply referred to him as "him." "He" was my only childhood friend, someone who understood me, and my hero.

In the fictional world where he existed, I was happy.

In the real world where he didn't exist, I wasn't happy.

The world has been a suffocating place to me since a young age. And I don't mean metaphorically. Yes, it was also a place that made it hard to breathe mentally, but before that, I physically had trouble breathing. I literally couldn't breathe as I liked. The world made my chest ache emotionally, but before that, my chest also physically ached. It literally felt like it might burst open.

Suffocating. Stuffy. Short of breath. Everyone uses these familiar expressions, but how many people have actually experienced their breath almost stopping? Everyone breathes subconsciously. They can do it while they sleep. If you're living a normal life, you're hardly ever going to risk true suffocation.

I had to be serious about my breathing back then. I spent most

of the day thinking about breathing. The way a seasoned photographer can read the lighting in a place, I could read the amount of oxygen in the air. No one senses the presence of air, but I could feel it tangibly. And around the time when most people fell asleep, I was focusing all my senses on breathing. Sticking a long tube out past the curtain of night like a snorkel, I desperately took in air.

In our modern age, with technology such as minuscule machines that can write a fictional past into your brain, it's commonly thought that asthma isn't a crushingly serious illness. It's true; unless it's a very severe case, you can generally live much like a healthy person if you possess the right knowledge to cope with it.

The problem was, my parents lacked that right knowledge. They perceived it as "an illness that makes it so you can't stop coughing every once in a while." Those two who had never even gotten hay fever would never understand the feeling of your breathing being restricted by a blocked respiratory tract.

No, maybe that wasn't where the fundamental problem lay. What they lacked wasn't experience with illness, nor knowledge, nor affection, but a rudimentary level of imagination. My parents fundamentally misunderstood "understanding." They could bring someone else closer to their world, but they couldn't bring themselves closer to someone else's world.

They irregularly squeezed themselves inside that tiny frame.

Worse yet, they had a baseless distrust in all things technological. People like this can be found in any time period. People with these crude thought processes that see undue value in the word "natural." They honestly believed in nonsense notions you might see written in dubious books, like "if you go to a hospital,

you'll get sick." Medicine hurts your health, treatment shortens your lifespan, all illnesses are just elaborate schemes made by doctors - they were convinced of these things. I guess that was their illness.

In their eyes, only what was there from the start was good, and everything else was evil. Constantly exhausted by this creed of theirs, I adopted an opposing creed out of necessity. In short: despise what's there, and love what's not there.

And that's how "he" was born.

I remember long, dark nights.

At the time, I was afraid of night. I still am now, but for a different reason. I wouldn't be able to answer which one was worse, because they're both the worst. There's no "better" with suffering. But if the amount of suffering was the same, I suppose I felt more despair as a child due to my softer heart.

Around the time the day was over and I got into bed, my breathing started to get out of sorts. First, there'd be light coughing. That was the sound of suffering knocking on my door. If this was happening, it was now futile to try and go to sleep. The coughing consistently worsened, reached its peak around 2 AM, then still continued through the night. Like my own body was trying to keep me from falling asleep.

It was hard to breathe lying face-up, so I sat as if hugging my bundled-up blanket. As time went on, my posture steadily leaned forward, ultimately putting me in a cowering pose. Someone might've seen me and thought I was pleading for forgiveness. Or it might look like I want to go back to being a fetus who doesn't know suffering. It was neither. That position was just the most

comfortable.

The most noticeable symptom was coughing, but coughs weren't the true essence of the suffering. What truly tormented me were breathing difficulties. The basic actions everyone subconsciously does from birth, breathing in and out, became laborious tasks for me at night. Imagine if your throat became the air plug on a life preserver. Or maybe if your lungs turned into hard plastic. If you can't breathe in easily, you can't breathe out easily either.

The feeling of not being able to breathe directly connects to a fear of death. Will this throat of mine eventually become completely blocked? Will it no longer be able to function, like a vacuum that sucked up a vinyl bag? When that time comes, I probably won't even be able to let out a moan. I'll desperately make a racket to call for help, but nobody will notice, I'll shake, I'll be terrified, I'll tremble, and my numerous shrieks and curses will stay stuck in my throat as I never even draw a final breath. Thinking about that made me cry from terror.

My room was located a decent ways from my parents' room, and that's where my bed was. I slept in the same room as my parents until I was 4, but my bed was relocated a little after I turned 5. My mother blithely reasoned that "the bathroom's closer there, so it should be good for you," but I couldn't see it as anything other than an isolation measure. They probably couldn't stand me keeping them awake with my coughing all night. I can't say I didn't understand.

I was told to call for them right away if something happened, but in the middle of an attack, I couldn't shout loud enough to reach my sleeping parents in the room diagonally across the hall, so

that isolation measure was also my death sentence. Besides, suppose I did desperately manage to crawl over to the bedroom. They wouldn't do anything for me. I would never be able to get used to my attacks, but my parents got used to seeing them. Once they learned that provided it wasn't too serious, they could leave me alone and it would get better by morning, any entreaty I made about my suffering would go in one ear and out the other.

Up until about age 7, if I had a major attack at night, they would take me to get emergency aid. When I heard the sound of the car engine out front and knew we would be going to the hospital, my worries quickly departed. Just thinking about things like that hospital smell, IVs, and inhalers calmed me down. (I loved hospitals, as a place.) And likely because of that relief, it was common that in the 30 minutes it took to reach the hospital, I would get better. As that happened again and again, my parents started to suspect I was faking sick. Maybe she's just exaggerating her coughing to get her parents to pay attention to her.

It's a common occurrence for asthmatics' attacks to calm down just from approaching a hospital, but I didn't know that at the time, and didn't yet have the objectivity needed to logically explain my condition. My parents' doubts strengthened by the day. They'd look at me coughing violently, and my dad would unsympathetically say "Your coughing's so overblown." Then my mom, suspectingly: "Does it really hurt that much?" Afterward, even when I had attacks, they would pretend not to notice.

Once, I was left with no choice but to call an ambulance myself. My parents wouldn't talk to me for a while after. They finally spoke to me after about a week, but the first things out of their mouths were abuse. "You embarrassed us." "Do you think we

have money to just throw around?" These people would probably be happier if I had died, I thought in my young age. This event struck from me once more the ability to expect anything from anyone.

Anyway, all I could do was wait for time to pass. I would occasionally poke my head out of my burrow, look at the moonlit clock by my bed, and pray for the night to end a second sooner. The greater my suffering, the slower time went, so irritation often gave me the urge to smash through the cover and wind the hands around manually. I liked summer solely because the nights were shorter.

When dawn came, my breathing started to stabilize and I could sleep, and in that momentary sleep, I fantasized about "him." But two hours later, I had to get up and go to school. The worrying thing about my illness was how when I wasn't coughing, I didn't look the slightest bit unwell. I could tell my parents I was sluggish and needed to rest, but of course they wouldn't hear it. They wouldn't believe me without visible evidence like numbers on a thermometer or rashes on my skin.

Thanks to that, I was always sleep-deprived, and spaced out during the day. My head was numb, my vision blurry, and all sounds seemed to come from behind a wall. In a world covered by light fog, only my suffering and my fantasies felt real.

As I grew older, my condition slowly got less severe, and the asthma gradually became more of a psychosomatic illness. While environmental factors started to have less influence on me, I instead became susceptible to worry and stress. If I do something like this, it might cause an attack, and I can't let an attack happen

while I'm here; the act of thinking about it in itself became the biggest trigger.

If I'd had someone to give me emotional support at the time, I might have been fully cured of my asthma much sooner (though of course, getting proper treatment at a medical institution would have been better than anything). This person would save me, this person would understand, this person would protect me - if I'd had someone who I could feel that way about, I'm sure it would have at least cut down on the number of anxiety-triggered attacks.

I had no friends. Due to being in the hospital for pleuritis at age 6 from winter to spring, I had a late start at my elementary school. Another part of it was that I was forbidden from going outside, "because I can't be causing other people trouble." And I couldn't be active, so I couldn't play in the same way the other kids did either. And I also couldn't attend most events like hikes or track meets.

But the biggest factor was my personality. My illness made me a servile, self-punishing person. My body was a failure that wouldn't let me live a normal life, and I myself was a troublemaker, in the sense that just me being there caused people major trouble; I was aware of this. That may have been the truth, but a child who hasn't even lived a decade has no obligation to face up to facts. I should've not worried about it and just lived brazenly.

But the two people I was closest to not only reinforced that servile attitude, they openly encouraged it. Without using words, they implied "you're going to bother a lot of people in your life, so at least keep your head down." I was raised to curse myself, a teaching I was constantly putting into practice. There wasn't even a chance of me making friends.

I didn't have a single good memory of school. Especially when I

went to my local public elementary school, I was a truly miserable creature.

At that time, I had a habit of walking with a slump. I naturally found myself walking that way because it made breathing easier, but my classmates would often tease me for this habit. When I saw boys imitating how I walked and laughing, I warned myself to be on guard, that I couldn't have an attack in front of them. Because they would just take that as another means to tease me. And I would continue to be a laughingstock for years. I absolutely couldn't show any further weakness. The more tense I made myself, the thinner the air in the classroom felt.

There were a very small number of people who knew about my illness and showed me concern. Those kinds of people would be extremely friendly at first and keep in step with me, but after a certain amount of time, they'd get irritated with my sensitive behavior, become annoyed at how just being with me limited them in many ways, and eventually get tired of me and leave. In worse cases, they'd start to hate me. So ultimately, I would wind up alone.

Just don't let my emotions get high-strung, and if I feel an attack coming, give up whatever I have to and go to the infirmary. Sticking to these two rules allowed me to barely avoid revealing the extent of my sickness to my classmates. In practice, my efforts were worth it, up to a point. But in winter fourth year, I had a severe attack right in the middle of class.

One of the boys saw the inhaler I carried around like a good-luck charm, and said something to tease me. That set it off. I should have just ignored him, but what he said was just too mean, so I snapped back at him. The boy was confused, not expecting a comeback, so he got angry. And to express that anger, he snatched

my inhaler from me and tossed it out the window.

I panicked. I started running to grab the inhaler, and right afterward, I showed the world a more intense asthma attack than I'd ever had before.

That day still comes back to me in my dreams.

My classmates' reaction was generally what I'd expected. They saw me having my attack not as a target for pity and compassion, but as something comical and disturbing. Ever since that, I hardly showed my face in class. I spent my remaining two-plus years of elementary school on the bed in the infirmary.

Of course, I didn't have a place in the infirmary either. There exist castes and cliques among dropouts. The infirmary had its own society, and I was ostracized for not fitting into it. Some students enrolled into the infirmary were able to curry favor with the school nurse, and some were not; I was naturally the latter.

Still, even if I couldn't call it a perfectly peaceful land, the infirmary might as well have been heaven compared to the classroom. I read books by myself there, and had long naps to catch up on years of lost sleep. On outdoors school days in fifth grade and field trip days in sixth grade, I was sleeping in the infirmary. I didn't really feel bad about missing them.

Either because I could finally get enough sleep, or because I didn't have to deal with the stress of my class watching me, those two years took me from being the shortest or second-shortest in my grade to being just below the average height. I also picked up knowledge about asthma, and come middle school, I could live a more or less average life. But by that time, solitude had already soaked into my bones, and I couldn't even think about befriending anybody.

It sounds strange, but I felt like if I went and made friends now, it would be unforgivable to my grade-school self. If my present self denied solitude, it would mean denying my past self. I would be admitting that those suffering-laden six years came to nothing but exhaustion.

I wanted to carry on the lonesome discoveries she made in those pitch black days. The suffering you endured was by no means for nothing; it's still breathing within me now, I wanted to reassure her.

I had a lonely time in middle school and a lonely time in high school. I still don't know if it was the right choice or not. But I think if I had tried to say the past never happened and live a normal life, I would push myself too far eventually and it would all fall apart. And then maybe I'd be more lonely than I am now.

That's what my memories of school were like. On days off, I stayed put in my room. My parents forbade me from going out unnecessarily, but also, I didn't feel any urge to go out, and there was no one I wanted to meet with. I didn't feel motivated to study, either. Just listening in class was sufficient to get me good grades, and even if I studied a ton, I couldn't imagine my parents would permit me to go on to college. So I would either read books I checked out from the library, or listen to music on a record player my dad no longer used.

When I didn't feel like books or music, I would watch people come and go from the bay window. My house was on high ground, so I could see quite a bit from the window. Rows of cherry blossoms in spring, fields of sunflowers in summer, maple trees in autumn, white snowscapes in winter. I never tired of gazing upon these sights, and of thinking about the childhood friend I'd never met.

To tell the truth, I needed family. I needed a friend. I needed a lover.

I dreamt up an entity who satisfied all three. “He” inevitably became a childhood friend. He could be warm like family, entertaining like a friend, dear like a lover, and matching my tastes in every way; I might call him the ultimate boy.

What would’ve happened if “he” had been there then? I simulated those what-ifs down to minute details. I took each and every memory of my past and wove him into them, to save each and every tearful me in those memories.

If I’d met “him” then.

If “he” had saved me then.

If “he” would’ve hugged me tight.

What kind of life would I be living by now?

Fantasies like that were my only shelter.

*

A turning point in my life arrived at age 16.

Right now, there’s only a single way for someone without any academic credentials or job experience to apply to be a Mimory engineer. Wait for a major clinic to do their periodic public recruitment, then create and submit Mimories according to a personal record the clinic sends you. If you meet their standards, you’re hired just like that.

It’s probably easiest to imagine it like a Rookie of the Year award for novels. It’s about as competitive as it is for novelists, too. Ultimately, supposing all things equal in what you may call “talent,”

some people might study their butts off and still not make the cut, while others might write some Mimories to kill time and get hired at the world's biggest clinic. If age and experience aren't relevant, you don't need technical know-how. Just like how a novelist doesn't need to be savvy in all the functions of a word processor or the technology of book-making, Mimory engineers don't need be well-acquainted with neuroscience or nanotechnology.

In fact, what Mimory engineers do is practically the same as what novelists do. The biggest difference is that novelists are writing for readers who they anticipate to be in the thousands or more, while Mimory engineers are only anticipating one single reader (not to say there aren't novelists who write just to satisfy a single reader). Novelists write by following requests that come from within, while Mimory engineers write by following external requests (not to say there aren't novelists who write according to external requests). They look over the client's personal record, and spin up an entirely pragmatic story for it. Maybe it sounds a bit better to say it's like a poet writing a sonnet for a patron.

It was a very simple world. Not only because the nature of the work was simple, but because the job of Mimory engineer was brand new. Mimory-related laws would be surely pop up in the future, making things more complex over time. But I quit my job as a Mimory engineer before that could happen, so I only knew the simple side of that world.

I was hired as a Mimory engineer at 16. Even now, four years later, 16-year-old Mimory engineers remained as rare as 16-year-old novelists.

I only learned that Mimory engineers were a thing that existed at age 15. I was staring at a course selection sheet, wondering what

to put down under “desired occupation,” when it suddenly caught my eye. My father was a dental engineer, so maybe I responded to the word “engineer.” I read the job description not expecting much, but then I intuitively knew.

This job was made for me.

My intuition was right on, and next summer, I was working at a decently well-known clinic as the then-youngest Mimory engineer ever. I don’t think I ever had to expend any effort worth calling effort. No one had to teach me; from the moment I read through a personal record and put my fingers on the keyboard, I knew exactly what I had to do.

I didn’t think I would get my parents’ blessing if I said I aspired to be a Mimory engineer, so I waited for the results first and told them I had been accepted after the fact. I emphasized how it was extremely difficult to get a job in the field, and I could keep it up without it impacting my high school studies, and most importantly, it made me money (to go to tuition), so my parents reluctantly approved of my employment.

The procedure went like this. The clinic would send me a client’s personal record. The information in the personal record was drawn out of them in a hypnotic state, so there were no lies in it. I would look over the personal record, and use it to create the fictional past I thought the client needed. I would frequently discuss with an editor and make small tweaks, and once the Mimories were in their best condition, I’d submit them to the clinic. I could usually complete this whole process within a month.

The order of creation would vary from person to person, but I always started by reading the personal record thoroughly enough to memorize it. It never gave clear directions like “you should make

something like this," so I read it feverishly. Before long, I started to almost have the illusion that the client was someone close to me. Even so, I would absorb myself in reading the personal record. In doing this, I would eventually touch upon the core of the client's soul, or something like that. It was a state beyond just sympathy or empathy - maybe it should be called channeling.

In that moment, I would become that person to a greater degree than they themselves were. I could perceive what the client wanted in the depths of their heart more clearly than the client could. The defects they weren't aware of themselves would rise to the surface, and I could look for and offer them pieces that fit those holes perfectly. In this way, I could give them the feeling that these memories were made for them and no one else.

I, who had kept fantasizing about filling in my own holes, could perform this hard-to-conceptualize job as easily as breathing - actually, much more easily than that. As a person who lacked everything, I could account for every kind of absence. The absence of things was in fact essential for creating a story that satisfied client expectations. I was able to get familiar with anything.

Even if you penned an epic tale, it would only have one reader, and even if you made up a sloppy story, that would only have one reader as well. So there were actually many Mimory engineers who did half-baked work. There were no objective standards for good or bad output, so they could excuse crude work by saying "it seems it didn't suit your sensibilities." When you only have a single reader each, you won't be criticized for repeating ideas from your previous work or self-plagiarizing, so it wasn't uncommon for people to continuously rehash their best works.

That's why there was a big gulf in quality between Mimory

engineers with good consciences and those without. And the best Mimory engineers would pick up repeat customers. Customers pleased with their Mimories would usually buy seconds and thirds. They're only uneasy about it the first time, and once they take that step, they're possessed by the satisfaction of reshaping their past.

It thus follows that engineers who mass-produced 50%-quality Mimories made good money in the short term, but in the long term, those who produced 90%-quality Mimories in smaller numbers earned much more. Customers moved away from the mass-producers over time, and in this competitive world, it was impossible to recover that lost trust. Purchasers of Mimories were conservative. No one was curious enough to opt for a Mimory engineer who they knew did sloppy work.

I dedicated myself to careful work. I stuck to deadlines, and I didn't slack off on my studies. It wasn't that I felt a sense of responsibility. It wasn't even that I wanted to live up to the clients' expectations. It's simply that I liked this job.

Reading personal records and coming up with fictional pasts also meant living other people's lives. As someone fed up with my own life, this profession had an ideal overlap between my hobbies and practical benefit. I neglected my school studies to devote myself to work. I always had my head in the clouds in class, and that head was filled with the personal record of my current client. Because I soaked in other people's lives so much, sometimes I would all but forget I was a teenage girl going to the local public high school.

My work gave me a reputation, and soon sums of money like I'd never seen before were being deposited in my bank account. In the first year I started to work, my income far exceeded my dad's. I

wasn't interested in making money, but gazing at the sums in my bankbook, I started to feel like I'd been recognized by society. I felt for the first time in my life that it was okay for me to be in this world. My parents didn't seem too fond of how their daughter had arbitrarily chosen her own path in life, but I put half of my earnings toward the house, and that was a big help for the family finances, so they couldn't be too mad about it.

The numbers had a tactile feel. I would open my bankbook at free moments and look at the swelling numbers for encouragement. The same way how when I was little, I would quietly take out the inhaler I kept in my pocket to calm my heart.

When I was 18, I collided with my parents over money matters, and thinking they would exploit me for the rest of my life at this rate, I left home. I convinced my aunt to let me stay at her house for a few months (she was as friendly as I would pay her to be), then got a room at an old apartment run by a friend of hers, and started living alone.

I continued to be lonely as ever, but it was proper "alone-time" loneliness, much preferable to being unfairly shoved out of a group. Not the loneliness of a classroom, but the loneliness of my own room. And as long as I was enjoying work, having to busily move from one fantasy to the next, I didn't have the spare time to feel like I was lonesome.

Through periodic visits to the hospital, I found my asthma had cleared up at some point. With the confidence to live by myself, I was finally free of the chains that bound me hand and foot.

My prospects were bright. My real life can finally begin, I thought.

It was an accurate premonition. But I think it slipped my mind

then that “real” isn’t always a positive quality, necessarily.

At age 19, I found a new disease.

Chapter 9: Storyteller

New Alzheimer's disease could be said to have birthed the profession of "Mimory engineer." Comparing New Alzheimer's to the pre-existing form of Alzheimer's, the most remarkable difference is the way you lose memories.

If the memory impairment caused by old Alzheimer's was far-sighted, the new version was near-sighted. With Alzheimer's, damage to recent memories is noticeable from early on, but distant memories only start to be affected after the disease has progressed somewhat. Meanwhile, New Alzheimer's was the exact opposite, with long-term memory loss being the early symptoms, and short-term memory loss appearing in the last stages. Alzheimer's made you unable to see things up close, but New Alzheimer's made you unable to see things far away - of course, this is all an extreme simplification. But it's a commonly-used way to quickly explain the nature of New Alzheimer's.

The same way near-sightedness isn't uncommon among the young, New Alzheimer's can be contracted at an even earlier age than early-onset Alzheimer's. There have been a number of cases reported even in teens (as a matter of fact, I was one of them). Alzheimer's remains a highly mysterious disease, but an even thicker fog hangs over New Alzheimer's. Like regular Alzheimer's, it was surmised to be a multifactorial hereditary disease with various genetic and environmental causes, but some whispered that nanobots gone rogue were the true culprits. Some researchers also theorized a new kind of infectious disease was directly causing it. Many varying opinions, but no definite theories. Simply put, we hardly knew anything. Needless to say, there was no cure.

Compared to old Alzheimer's, memory loss from the new form is much more systematic. Like a log file that can't hold everything, so it automatically deletes data starting from the oldest, your memories are eaten up in order starting from the oldest. You forget your infancy, you forget your childhood, you forget your adolescence, you forget your adulthood, you forget your middle-age. Eventually, you can only remember the events of the past few days.

Of course, the finish line of the new form was the same as the old. When the corruption of memory catches up to the present, the patient acquires Apallic syndrome and dies soon after. The memory loss part gets all the attention, but they're diseases directly linked with death, and once someone contracts it, there's no hope of saving them. The current fatality rate is 100%. The estimated remaining lifespan after you contract Alzheimer's is 7 or 8 years, but with New Alzheimer's, it's not even half that.

Patients with Alzheimer's lose the ability to self-recognize by the end of it and enter a trance-like state, but New Alzheimer's patients don't show any obvious damage other than episodic memory loss up until death. No damage to high-level brain function or impaired orientation, normal thought processes, and no notable effects on personality. (There are findings that claim short-term memory is actually improved, but this is probably just because the loss of long-term memories reduces the number of memories competing with one another.) It won't get in the way of everyday life, and it's not an impediment in most jobs. And no hallucinations or delusions - those around you will be most grateful for it.

But to those suffering from it themselves, it can't be called anything but hell. While your senses remain perfectly clear, you're

forced to watch as the person you are disappears. If Alzheimer's is a disease that eats at you from the inside with a dull pain, you could call New Alzheimer's a disease that slowly slices away your limbs without anesthetic. Different qualities of fear, but I think most people would agree the latter is more agonizing.

Because of this, there are a fair number of New Alzheimer's patients who take their own lives before the symptoms fully progress. I want to end it all while I can still be myself, they say.

Medicine can slow the progression of the symptoms to an extent, but New Alzheimer's is discovered late by its nature. You can tell right away when there are problems with your immediate memory or short-term memory, but no one immediately makes the connection that their inability to remember infancy or childhood is because of a disease. Unless you have someone to periodically talk about the distant past with, it's difficult to be aware of early-stage New Alzheimer's. Most frantically run to the hospital by the time they start losing memories of their late teens.

Thus, the majority of patients have no memories of childhood. This might be considered an even greater tragedy than repeatedly forgetting the ones you love most. One patient described their mental state as "constantly being lost in a town I don't know." As it turns out, our most truly important memories are focused in our early life, and among them, perhaps a true sense of security can only be enjoyed in infancy. True security - a perfect, faultless peace of mind, which Charlie Brown called "sleeping in the backseat of a car while your parents drive." Not that I was given such a thing from the start, anyway.

In my case, the discovery of the disease was a complete

coincidence. My dominant hand was feeling numb, so I went to the hospital and got a brain CT scan, where they found symptoms of New Alzheimer's. (Incidentally, the cause of the numbness was simply fatigue.)

On the way home after being told about my disease, my mind was the picture of peace. I knew what kind of disease New Alzheimer's was. I also knew, of course, that many people who get it commit suicide. And that this disease would result in death. Regardless, I didn't sink into despair, and I didn't lament my fate. I didn't shed a single tear, and couldn't even afford to feel a hole in my stomach.

That said, I did suspect it would eventually start to sink in and I'd be beside myself with anxiety, so I decided to take a month off work. Because I had worked so feverishly up to then, they readily accepted my request.

I spent the new ten days or so idly, yet I felt not an atom of fear or regret. The only thing I did have was concern. Why am I being so calm about this? Am I fundamentally misunderstanding something? Or maybe I'm just not ready to accept it as reality yet.

I stayed locked up in my room and aimlessly watched TV shows I didn't even care to watch. Being a workaholic who thought about her job 24/7 - even in my dreams - I had no idea how you were supposed to spend free time. In these few years, I'd spent all my days off giving myself input so as to add more variety to my Mimories. Books, movies, music, and vacations were all no more than Mimory-making research to me. Removing those from the equation instantly had me at a loss for what to do. I really never thought about anything but work, I thought to myself.

Three more days passed, and my concern turned into a

nagging feeling. I laid down in bed and thought about things to try and put this feeling into words. And eventually, I realized.

Come to think of it, I was having much fewer flashbacks lately. While taking a bath or waiting to fall asleep in bed, I would often suddenly remember something from the past and become miserable, but that was hardly happening anymore. The reason for this required no thought. It was because my traumatic childhood memories were being erased by the disease. That was the reality of that feeling I kept having. As I lost my memories, I wouldn't feel fear - it would in fact make life easier to live.

A careful look back through my life revealed there wasn't a single thing I didn't want to forget. No people I didn't want to forget, no moments I didn't want to forget, no places I didn't want to forget, nothing.

I was dumbfounded by that fact. After all, if a normal person heard they were going to lose their memories, then before anything else, they would write down everything they didn't want to forget. Then they'd read it over and over to try and carve it into their brains. But I didn't do that. I had no need to. If you removed all those harsh memories I'd want to forget if I could, only memories as worthless as garbage would remain.

Should I be glad I won't have to fear loss for the remainder of my life? Or should I lament that I hadn't been able to acquire anything to lose? I couldn't decide. What I could say was that as the memory loss healed the wounds in my heart, a longing for others was slowly starting to bud. I had been watching TV without caring about the programs themselves simply because I wanted to hear people's voices.

I'm lonely. Right now, I could honestly acknowledge that

feeling. Or to flip it around: before knowing about my disease, I had no time to even recognize my loneliness. The removal of my emotional suffering opened up space in my heart, and for the first time I could accept the truth: I hadn't chosen loneliness, loneliness had chosen me. You could say there was no longer a reason to consider the accumulation of my feelings into the future, so there was also no reason to keep acting emotionally frigid.

It felt futile to go against that desire. As recommended by my doctor, I signed up for a meetup organized by a New Alzheimer's care facility in the city. The idea was for fellow patients to share their concerns and anxieties, so you could get to know lots of other people with the disease there.

Suffering is a personal thing no matter how far you try to stretch it, so even people with the same disease won't be able to understand; I had learned this from having asthma. So as far as the disease, I had no expectations that it would make me more positive, take away my worries, or any other change. But I didn't care. I simply wanted to try filling this loneliness I was able to feel for the first time in my life in a healthy way. Not an unhealthy way, like lying in bed and fantasizing.

*

Mimory engineers don't use similes. Unlike novel-readers or movie-watchers, those with Mimories only perceive what's there as what's there. They don't do any puzzle-like interpretations of them, like "is the scenery depicted here some kind of metaphor?" or "is the event that happens here some kind of allegory?" They don't look too hard for additional meaning in the story they're given,

accepting Mimories the way they accept life. So we don't have an artistic mindset either, simply stacking up pleasing episodes and nothing more. Because of this, Mimory engineers are considered akin to fast food among those who create stories.

That's fine, I think. I like standing-up soba and conveyor belt sushi myself. I'd be sad if they went away.

That said, I'm obviously not making light of similes themselves. Sometimes, they can dig up the heart of things in a way that goes beyond the storyteller's intent. The words we use are much more clever than we are.

For instance, when I entered that classroom-sized room and saw ten chairs arranged in a circle with nine anxious patients sitting in them, I thought "it feels like we're able to start telling ghost stories." It's not much of a simile, yet it correctly got to the truth without me intending to. The stories they were about to tell me would chill my spine and make me nauseous with fear. And when the tenth person's story approached, it would summon forth something that should not be in this world.

The members were of various ages and genders, and as expected, I was the youngest. I was a little timid, but I took a deep breath and sat down, quickly greeting those around me. And then I took a better look at everyone, one at a time. They all had melancholy expressions. I had no doubt their eyes were the unhappiest in the world. I've seen something like this in a movie, it suddenly occurred to me. I thought for about 20 seconds, then remembered that it was called Fight Club. I was 17 when I saw that movie. Which meant I at least had my memories going back to 17.

Bottled tea was distributed to everyone, but not a single person drank it. The others, frequently exchanging looks with one

another, were probably not attending for the first time. Maybe I was the only one without any acquaintances.

Everyone there was neatly dressed, and I only then became aware of my own appearance. I'd bought my clothes and shoes three years ago, and wasn't wearing any sorts of accessories. I had basically no makeup on, my skin was rough from lack of sleep and neglect, and my never-once-dyed black hair was so unkempt, I looked like a ghost. I was not presentable.

I'll go get my hair cut after this is over, I thought.

I heard a throat being cleared.

"Well then, how about we get started." A man in his forties sitting to my left got the ball rolling. "Who wants to begin?"

A few people glanced at each other and vaguely shook their heads.

"All right, then I'll start as usual..."

The man smiled wryly and began to tell his story with a routine tone of voice.

"...I can't remember half of anything about my wife."

My honest impression was that it was a familiar-sounding story. He graduated college and got married right after, took a loan to start up a store, made it through financially unstable times with his wife, soon hit a stride with business, had a kid, and just as he thought things were getting started, his disease was discovered. He feared his death, but more than that, he feared forgetting his wife and kid. He remembered his aunt who couldn't recognize her family's faces due to a cognitive disorder. Thinking about ending up like that himself made him want to end it all before that happened. Etcetera.

Once the man's story was done, there was sparse applause. I

quietly clapped as well, but I was honestly thinking “sounds like you lived a pretty happy life.” I felt ashamed of myself for feeling envy instead of compassion, so I clapped louder.

After that, everyone went around clockwise talking about their worries. Maybe they thought about me and intentionally made sure I would be last, as the newcomer. Not everyone spoke as unfalteringly as the first man; some talked shakily, having trouble throughout, and I was quietly relieved.

The story of the fourth speaker, a female librarian, had a few parts that struck me. While listening to her story, I noticed myself subconsciously thinking “with a little tweaking, I could use this for Mimories,” and I hurried to cast those rude thoughts aside. What was I doing thinking about work at a time like this? Nothing could be ruder than using the frank admissions of strangers as fuel. I tried to make myself close off the Mimory engineer circuits in my brain, and accept their stories the same way people accept their Mimories.

After the sixth person’s story, there was a short break. The man to my left asked me about my impressions of the meetup. Wanting to reply with careful word choice, I thought back on the six stories I’d heard so far. And then suddenly, something occurred to me with a shiver.

All of them are only talking about family, friends, and lovers.

The ghost stories resumed. The seventh spoke of family and friends. The eight spoke of a lover and friends. The ninth spoke of family, friends, and a cat. I was convinced. The process alone was what differed, but everyone but me was settling on the same conclusion: “my last line of defense is my bonds with those close to me.”

The old woman to my right was finishing up her story. What should I talk about?, I wondered. At first, I'd planned to talk about the emptiness of not even having any fear of losing my memories. But if I, tasked with sending off this meeting, said something like that, wouldn't it just earn me their scorn? Wouldn't it just soil the carefully-assembled atmosphere they'd been building?

Would my despair unintentionally sound like cynicism toward the despair of these nine people?

I reopened the circuits I'd closed. I switched my head over to writing mode, and came up with a new story.

I'll do a story appropriate for this place, I thought.

I closed my eyes and focused. I broke down their nine stories until they were a muddled mess and extracted their essence. Then I added a few of my own personal facts - or maybe desires that were an extension of my personal facts - to make it appear original, and then injected some noise to cover up its falsehoods, and appeal to its reality.

I assigned "him," who I'd developed in my fantasies since I was young, in the role of a prince riding on a white horse.

I completed this whole process in less than 30 seconds. I had time to spare, so I even gave the finished story a nice title.

Since contracting New Alzheimer's, my abilities as a storyteller hadn't weakened, but in fact matured. I don't know why. Maybe it's the same logic behind why drinking and smoking can have positive effects on writing despite being bad for you. As you forget unnecessary things, it feels like excess meat being stripped from your brain.

The woman's story seemed to be over. Once the applause ended, the nine turned their attention to me, all but saying "now

it’s your turn.” I put my left hand to my right lung and took a short, deep breath, and began telling a fictional past I had just made up - but in a sense, had been building since I was very young.

“I have a childhood friend.”

*

By the time my story finished, half the people were in tears. Some even took out handkerchiefs to dry their eyes in the middle. My lies sounded more real than anyone else’s stories, and had shaken the audience’s hearts.

Once the applause came to a stop, one of the members - the woman who talked about her cat - spoke.

“I’m glad you came here today.” She took off her reading glasses, rubbed her eyes, then carefully put them back on. “Thank you for telling us your wonderful story. You may be very unhappy, but you’re a very happy girl. You’re blessed with the perfect partner.”

I didn’t know how to respond, so I bowed my head. Then all the members gave their thoughts about my story one after another. Every time they sent warm words my way, guilt hid behind my stiff smile.

It seemed I may have gone a bit too far. Come to think of it, this was the first time I’d ever directly seen the response to a story I created. I didn’t think it would get this big of a reaction. To think I would be reminded of the magic stories possess here.

“It’s such a pity for someone so young.” “How about you bring him here sometime? We’ll all welcome him.” “It’s reassuring that you have someone who understands near at hand. If I didn’t have

my wife, I think I'd be desperate." "Hearing your story made me miss my boyfriend, too."

I nodded to their words with a dry smile on my lips. And the more I nodded, the more miserable I felt. I even wondered: if these people were to find out my story was fake, wouldn't they think I was making fun of them? And then I got fed up with myself for having a persecution complex after deceiving these good-hearted people.

I came up with reasons to decline trading contact information with anyone, then put the place behind me. I was totally absentminded on the subway ride home. My reflection in the window glass looked ugly, like something's cast-off shell. It looked like it had been weathered down through the end of summer, crumbling to pieces.

I'm never going to one of those meetups again, I thought.

*

From the beginning of summer to the end of it, I was alone.

I didn't even turn on the TV or radio anymore. I stopped looking at the bankbook that once gave me mental support. I couldn't find any consolation there now. I was satisfied with just enough money for living expenses and a coin to ferry me to the afterlife, so it was all just excess.

The numbers in my bankbook demonstrated how I could do anything and yet could do nothing. If a normal person had this much time and money to spare, they'd probably hang out with friends, or spend time with family, or go on dates. To make the most of their few remaining years, they'd have extravagant

vacations, throw flashy parties, or hold a fantastic wedding.

I had absolutely no outlets for using my money. I thought about moving somewhere that allowed pets and raising a cat, but quickly rethought it as I was browsing catalogs. A person who might not even live three more years shouldn't get a pet. Someone who couldn't even look after themselves couldn't take such an important role.

Besides, it was such a crude motivation to seek healing from a cat because I couldn't get along with humans. I'd feel bad for the cat that had to get along with me. Cats are free creatures that give the sense they should be raised by people who could live without a cat. Having an owner like me who couldn't live without a cat would make the cat unhappy.

When I got lonely, I'd go to my apartment's veranda and watch people pass by. Like going back in time to the days when was stuck in my room and looked out the bay window. As it turns out, I hadn't changed at all since those days.

I spent that summer mainly just thinking about how to fulfill my most basic desires.

I leaned on the wall in the corner of my room listening to old records all day, frequently flipping the records over or swapping them out to kill time. After starting to become aware of my time left alive, I came to like the music I liked before even more. In particular, I saw more charm in old songs I had found tedious before. The simpler the accompaniment and melody, the more firmly I could sense each note, and they soaked deep into my dried-up heart. When I tired of music, I gazed at the record grooves and the jackets, and rested my ears.

In the evenings, I walked to the supermarket near the station, did several loops around the store to carefully pick out ingredients, and went straight home to the apartment. Back in my room, I opened up a recipe book I bought on a whim from a local old bookstore, and took on each of the recipes starting from page one. I was blindly faithful to the measurements and times, making no improvisations or compromises, just cooking exactly according to the recipe. When I completed a dish, I presented it neatly even though I wasn't showing it to anyone, and inspected it from various angles. Then I sat at the table and ate it, savoring the flavor to satisfy my appetite.

After eating, I took a long bath to wash myself thoroughly. Not necessarily to feel clean, but to fall asleep more comfortably. After exiting the bath, I got in bed before night fell; including some sleeping-in in the morning, I got a good ten hours of sleep to satisfy my need for sleep.

There was one more desire I chose to not think about too much. Luckily, living a quiet life by myself, I was able to forget such a desire even existed.

I took my medicine only occasionally when it occurred to me, so the symptoms my New Alzheimer's steadily progressed. Soon, I had totally forgotten the childhood days of asthma that made me suffer so much. I didn't feel any strong feelings about that.

My final day was steadily approaching. Despite this, I was willingly pushing the hands forward. You might call it a passive, sluggish suicide.

When listening to records, when cooking, when taking a bath, when lying in bed. The more I tried to think about nothing, the

more active my brain became.

The story about “him” I’d manufactured at the patient meetup was still going around in my head.

Because of a few details I’d added to the story to give it some reality, “his” existence started to feel more real. I think a large part of it was having spoken about “him” to someone else for the first time. I listened to the story that was coming out of my mouth as if it were someone else’s story. Maybe a better way to put it was, I heard the story through the ears of those present. This feedback earned “him” a kind of objective and social presence, maturing him into a more tactile entity. He came closer to a living being.

As my loneliness and despair deepened, the story of “him” glittered brighter. I would repeatedly trace the story from beginning to end, making minute changes to the details, revising and revising again, then read it over from the beginning, looking at empty space and smiling.

It was emotional self-harm. Fantasies are a deadly medicine; in exchange for meager joy, a transparent poison accumulated in my body.

One day, a number of things coincided, and I succeeded in cooking a very difficult meal. It turned out so well, it made me want to take a photo, and it tasted fantastic too. I subconsciously thought that “he” would probably be happy to eat this. In that moment, I completely forgot that “he” was a fictional person.

Immediately after, I remembered the truth that “he” didn’t exist, and my head went blank.

A few seconds after, something inside me broke.

The spoon slipped out of my fingers, hit the floor, and made an unpleasant sound. I leaned down to pick it up, but suddenly my

body went limp, and I collapsed to the ground.

I'd reached the critical point of emptiness, and couldn't bear it anymore.

Before I knew it, I was sobbing loudly.

I don't want to die like this, I thought. It's just too cruel for things to end this way. I still haven't obtained anything real.

Before I died, I wanted someone to compliment me just once. I wanted to be thanked. I wanted to be pitied. Like someone dealing with a little kid, I wanted to be unconditionally accepted and gently embraced. I wanted the 100% perfect boy who 100% understood my loneliness to shower me with 100% love. And after I died, I wanted him to grieve my death and have a wound that would never heal etched into his heart. I wanted him to loathe the disease that killed me, loathe the people who weren't kind to me, and curse the world that was without me.

Of course I couldn't be satisfied by fantasies. The me's within me are still crying like always. The newborn me, the 1-year-old me, the 2-year-old me, the 3-year-old me, the 4-year-old me, the 5-year-old me, the 6-year-old me, the 7-year-old me, the 8-year-old me, the 9-year-old me, the 10-year-old me, the 11-year-old me, the 12-year-old me, the 13-year-old me, the 14-year-old me, the 15-year-old me, the 16-year-old me, the 17-year-old me, the 18-year-old me, all of them were holding their knees and bawling like I was now. Even if my memories of them vanished, their cries still echoed. I needed a realistic salvation for them, but I couldn't find one wherever I looked.

"I'm not scared, I have nothing to lose" had been such a bluff. I was scared of dying with nothing. So much so that I couldn't stop shaking.

But what could I do about it now? I had never made a friend since the day of my birth, so what could I possibly do? Never mind the 100% perfect boy, could I even get a 50% middling friend?

Could I talk with my coworkers? Should I contact someone in my profession and tell them the truth? Even if I did, all I could get out of it was standard sympathy. In fact, if I wasn't lucky, it might just please the person I spoke to. I knew my coworkers and others in my profession were envious of me. I'd heard about their insults here and there. Even if I was lucky enough to pick someone who didn't antagonize me, just me worrying "they might view me as an enemy" made it impossible to establish a true trusting relationship. To be honest, I was terrified of them.

Then should I just talk to some stranger in town? Look for friends on social media? Not a chance. As if I could find people who really understood that way. It would be like looking for a single needle in the desert. And talk about risky; it could easily be a very unpleasant experience.

If 30% sympathy, 40% understanding, and 50% love were enough, I might be able to find that if I try like hell. But that wouldn't do. To save me, to save us, it would absolutely take the 100% perfect boy.

People might call that an unreasonable expectation. They'd scold me, saying a person who's neglected socialization all her life suddenly getting the ultimate love would be too good to be true. They might say "even 50% sympathy would be too good for you." But my intuition as a Mimory engineer was telling me something. Only being held tight by the ultimate boy can save you. There was surely no way other than that to unravel the tightly-woven

loneliness in me, formed over such a long time.

I spent the next few days crying, but even so, I didn't try to stop thinking about "him." If I'd come this far, I thought, I might as well keep stripping off the skin until I can see bone.

I completely forgot about taking my medicine, so my symptoms advanced rapidly. I lost my memories up to 15, and forgot the oppressiveness of my time in compulsory education. Three-fourths of my life was shadowed by nothingness, and it truly approached empty.

I continued to think about "him."

I stopped listening to records, and I stopped cooking. It was too much trouble to even cry standing up, so I held my pillow and crawled around the room like a caterpillar, lying in bed, lying on the floor, lying in the kitchen, lying in the entryway, lying in the bathroom, lying on the veranda. Even then, the sluggishness surrounding my body wouldn't leave.

I continued to think about "him."

I felt distaste even toward the Mimory creation I enjoyed so much, and felt a little nauseous even looking at someone's personal record. Whatever I looked at, I could only feel jealousy, and I despised people who lived lives without want, yet still wanted happy Mimories.

I continued to think about "him."

And then one day, an innocent madness came over me.

While ruminating over my memories of "him" like usual, it occurred to me.

Can people imagine someone they've never even met this vividly?

Can people love someone they've never even met this wholeheartedly?

Was there anything wrong with putting this much into a fictional entity?

Am I making a fundamental mistake here?

I wonder.

Perhaps.

Is it possible?

Is "he" not a fictional person, but someone who really exists?

Had the disease merely taken away the important parts of the memories, and I really did have a childhood friend who I became convinced was a fantasy?

It was a truly shameful idea. If someone had told me this before my disease, I would respond with a laugh.

But in that moment, I saw it as a divine revelation. I'd long since lost my sanity. I clung to that theory. Now, my final hope resided in the blanked memories brought about by my disease.

*

I was home again after a year and a half.

Taken hold by the idea that "he" really existed, I was unable to stay put, and got on the early morning train bound for my hometown.

To reunite with "him," of course.

I had my yearbook from middle school in my bag, and I kept re-reading it on the way. The sight of a 19-year-old girl reading

through a yearbook by herself on the train was a bizarre one, but the early morning down-train was sparse, and no one stopped to look.

I drilled all the faces and names in the yearbook into my brain. None of my classmates' faces felt familiar, as if I had grabbed a yearbook for an entirely unknown school by mistake.

I looked for boys who most closely matched my impression of "him," but that proved difficult to find among photos where everyone had similar smiling expressions. "He" had no definite shape in my memories, only an impression and an atmosphere. To discern that, I would need continuous information like behavior or changes in expression.

Among the photos of the classrooms and school events, I couldn't find myself. I always hung my head with a fretful look, so I must have had no appeal as a subject for photographs. The middle-schoolers in the yearbook were lively, and I saw something in them which I had already lost. In less than a year, I would turn twenty - provided I even lived that long.

The train arrived at my hometown before noon. It was a dull rural town in the corner of Chiba. When I left at age 18, I was terribly uncertain about going so far away to the city, but returning here now, I realized it wasn't even that big of a distance. I went through the ticket gate and exited the cramped building.

My hometown felt like I was visiting it for the first time. The sky, the greenery, the sea, all of it was unknown to me. So naturally, I felt no nostalgia either. While I did feel some faint déjà vu when I looked at rundown cafés and shuttered stores, the feeling was closer to seeing something in real life which I was acquainted with

from TV and books, as I was unable to make any connection to my own past.

After checking my location with a map on my phone and devising a general route to take, I put my left hand on my lung, took a deep breath, and started to walk. I was beside myself with worry wondering what I'd do if I bumped into my parents, but I also felt a sense of elation to have an objective in mind for the first time in a while.

The elementary school, the middle school, the shopping district, the park, the community center, the library, the walking trail, the hospital, the supermarket. I followed the map to walk here and there. Though it was Sunday, I hardly passed by anyone. It was probably that the population was low, rather than people not being out and about. I was used to city life now, so it felt like walking around a town with a curfew. It also struck me as like an artificial town soon to be populated with artificial people.

The sky was a clear blue, and I could see massive cumulonimbus clouds far in the distance. Walking through this nostalgic scene blurred by summer sunlight, I found myself fantasizing about a story set in this town.

If only I didn't have to part from "him," and could've kept living in this town.

I surely wouldn't become a Mimory engineer, and would be enjoying life as a normal college student by now. I'd get a scholarship and do part-time jobs and live close to "him," in a way halfway to us living together, and I'd make him meals and help with chores and play the part of a young wife.

Soon, I started to see shadows of myself from potential worlds all around the town. In those worlds, I was happy. My grade-

schooler self was riding on the luggage carrier of “his” bike, clinging to his back and laughing. My middle-school self was wearing a yukata and holding hands with “him,” watching the fireworks. My high-school self, on the way home from school, snuck in a quick kiss with “him” in the shadow of the bus stop. My college self was going to the supermarket with “him,” carrying half his groceries and walking alongside him like we were a married couple.

Maybe they weren’t fantasies, but flashbacks. Like judging the outcome of an experiment, I could imagine that they were plausible. A rather deranged state of mind. It would seem I’d been possessed by a monster of imagination that dwelled in this land.

The town was small, so I could go around to all the notable buildings and facilities in half a day. Needless to say, I made zero findings. I was only spoken to by a single old person. They asked for directions to the police box, and I replied that I wasn’t from here, so I didn’t know. That was all I could answer.

The sunset had a color that made me think of wilting sunflowers. Sitting on an embankment still warm from the heat of the day, I gazed at the sea. I took off my shoes and put them aside, airing out my feet that were chafed from walking. I drank half a bottle of mineral water I got from a vending machine, then poured the rest on my feet. The cold water seeped into the wound. Once it dried, I applied a bandage from the drug store.

There were hardly any young people in town to start with. I saw a couple of kids in elementary or middle school, but I didn’t see a single person around my age. The town was half-dead, and had no real hope of recovering. All that was left was for it to rot. Of course, I probably had even less time left than this town.

My whole body ached, and my head was fogged. But I couldn't sit around here forever. I put on my shoes, put my hands on my knees, and staggered to my feet. I grabbed my bag with the yearbook and hung it over my shoulder.

Just then, I heard young people's voices from the trail, and I reflexively turned to them. A boy and a girl around age 14 were walking together. The boy was dressed casually for a stroll, but the girl wore a pretty yukata. It was a deep blue texture with a simple fireworks pattern on it, and she wore little red chrysanthemums in her hair. I watched the girl for a while. I was somewhat jealous; I wanted to wear a yukata like that and walk with my lover.

There was probably a festival going on somewhere in town. I decided to follow after the two of them. They went past the shopping district and turned right, went straight along the narrow path by the rice paddies, crossed the railroad tracks, and finally, a shrine that wasn't too big or too small came into sight. I heard the sounds of a festival and smelled the smells.

If fated reunions exist, I thought.

Wouldn't this be the most fitting stage for one?

I wandered around the area like a sleepwalker, searching for any sign of "him." Of course, I didn't know his face. I didn't know his voice. Still, I was convinced I would know with just a glance. I was convinced he would know me with just a glance, too. Maybe he wouldn't immediately believe in a coincidental reunion at first and keep walking past. But after walking a few steps, I'm sure he would turn back around.

I moved through the crowd and kept walking, seeking my fantasy lover who I had blown up like a soap bubble.

By the time the stands started to close down, my heart was starting to give in. The festival sounds ceased as if exhausted, the smells were carried off on the wind, and the lights were swallowed by the darkness, leaving a silence that hurt my ears. I sat up from the stone steps and left the shrine behind.

Even though I'd loitered around in front of those stands for so long, I hadn't eaten anything. I walked around looking for a restaurant, and found just one place still open by the station. Lured by the aroma of grilled fish, I entered the restaurant.

Once I sat at my table, the day's fatigue came down on me all at once. I felt like I couldn't walk another step. I didn't really look at the menu and ordered a grilled fish special, then stared in the direction of the baseball game on TV while guzzling ice water brought by the waiter.

I heard a customer sitting at the counter order sake, so I thought about having some alcohol myself. I'd always sort of avoided it because I had the impression it was something you drank with a large group, but if I could forget the bad things for even a moment, maybe it wouldn't be bad to try it. Surely I didn't need to be worried for my health at this point.

I twisted my body toward the counter and called for a waiter. I ordered the same sake the girl had ordered earlier, then the waiter mechanically repeated my order and left. I felt a little relief that they didn't confirm my age, and a little sadness at the same time. Did I clearly look the age where there was no problem letting me drink?

I left my seat and went to check my face in the bathroom mirror. Possibly because of how many years I'd gone with barely any need to change expression, I sensed no liveliness or vitality in it

at all. Like an exhausted single mother in her late twenties. Even though my mind was stopped around 14.

When I got back to my seat, some sake and a sake cup had been haphazardly placed on the table. I timidly sipped it; it had a bad taste I couldn't describe further. I grabbed the glass of ice water and rinsed out the aftertaste. It was so bitter and smelly and sweet, it made me suspect it was trying to be as hard to drink as possible. I couldn't imagine why people would drink this by choice.

Even so, I forced myself to drink about half, and my body started to warm up. I guess this is what being drunk feels like, I thought as I watched it whirl around in the bottom of the sake cup.

Something was caught in the corner of my mind, but I had no idea what was causing it. I turned to the counter once again to order some warm tea. I cupped my left hand by my mouth to call for the waiter, but froze in that position.

The girl sitting at the counter had a familiar face.

I immediately compared her face with the photos in the yearbook I'd looked back through on the train. Excepting the effects of four years of aging, it neatly matched one of my classmates in third year. Her hairstyle and appearance had changed a fair bit, but there was no doubt. This girl had been the class chairwoman.

Finally, I was able to meet someone I knew.

My body moved before I could think. I approached her and spoke.

"Um... Do you remember me?"

The ex-chairwoman blinked, sake cup still in hand. Her face seemed to be evaluating which of us was drunk. I was briefly worried I had the wrong person, but I didn't think so. It was just that I had left a very weak impression in middle school.

She laughed awkwardly.

“Err, sorry. Any hints for me?”

“We were in the same class in middle school, third year.”

She briefly entered a thinking pose, then slapped her knee. But the actual name didn’t come to her, so she paused after “Er, the asthmatic...”

I smiled wryly and gave my name. “I’m the asthmatic Touka Matsunagi.”

“Right, right, Miss Matsunagi,” she nodded, seeming to now remember.

“May I sit with you?”, I asked. It would be hard to imagine myself doing this normally, but I was desperate then.

“Huh? Right, sure.”

I had the waiter change my seat, then sat down next to her. The sake was now starting to kick in. I tried to overexaggerate my joy at reuniting with a classmate I only knew from yearbook photos, and she surely did the same for her reunion with a classmate who left so little impression she forgot my name. We proved terrible at holding a conversation with each other, but I was happy to meet someone who remembered me, however vaguely.

“Miss Matsunagi, what are you up to now? College student?”

I told her she was right. My second lie since coming to town. She probably wouldn’t believe that I was a Mimory engineer, and I didn’t want to give too weird an impression to the first classmate I was able to finally meet. Saying I was a college student visiting home on summer break seemed like the safest option.

“A college in Tokyo, huh. I’m jealous,” she said, not sounding particularly jealous.

“And what are you doing?”

“Me? I’m...”

Then she talked for a while about how things were for her lately. (I know it’s rude to say, but as stories told by people who pointlessly stay behind in rural towns often are, it was horrifyingly average and boring.) Once I’d heard the details up to her getting her current job, Firefly’s Light began to play through the restaurant, signifying closing time. “Hmm, that time already,” the ex-chairwoman said, looking at her watch.

While waiting behind her as she took care of the bill, I was for no particular reason trying to remember the proper lyrics to Firefly’s Light. But absolutely nothing came to mind other than the title. Maybe I had never learned it, or maybe it was a result of New Alzheimer’s.

The clearly-mistaken lyrics “So fleeting and so meaningless, just like my yearning heart” wouldn’t leave my mind, like a catchy song from a commercial.

As we parted, the ex-chairwoman seemed to remember something.

“Since about a year ago, we classmates who are still in the area have been meeting up for drinks. Sort of like a mini class reunion. Would you like to join us, Miss Matsunagi?”

I felt bad to leave her like this, so I was beyond grateful, having just been thinking about how I could keep her from leaving. It was such an ideal segue, my face briefly reverted to a serious expression. I hurried to recreate my smile and told her I’d be glad to take part.

She told me the time and place, I thanked her, and we parted. (She apparently had business and would be absent from the next class reunion.) I took the last train back to the apartment, had a

shower, and put a fresh bandage on my foot. Then I stood at the bathroom mirror and looked at my face.

I was now painfully aware of how much I'd neglected looking my age.

I had hardly ever concerned myself with my appearance. I hadn't thought of a human's appearance as anything more than the shape of a container. Like the cover of a book or a record jacket, I considered it irrelevant to the actual nature of the thing.

But as my insides approached empty, I became more concerned about the shape of the container. True, it might not be the essence of a person. But I can't say I've never purchased a book based on the cover. I can't say I've never bought a record because of the jacket. If you want people to know about what's inside, you have to put care into the visual element too - that's an undeniable fact. My insides weren't something I could brag about to others in the first place. And most importantly, appearance was a very important factor for love.

I'll get myself in order, I thought. Just under twenty years late, but I need to make up for it at least a little.

The class reunion was in two weeks. In those two weeks, I focused on revising my looks.

The next day, I had a basic breakfast, then looked up beauty parlors, makeup classes, and makeover salons online, making reservations at every one. Then I went to the bookstore and, yes, bought tons of fashion and beauty magazines too, which I read thoroughly for the next two days like a student cramming before an exam. Once I had a decent sense of how to style my hair and face, I next visited a boutique and spoke with a clerk to buy new clothes and shoes.

All of this totaled up to a pretty outrageous cost, but it just relieved me to finally have a reason to spend my money. I couldn't take my money to the next life, anyhow.

I basically tried anything I could think of. I didn't worry about money, tossed shame and reputation aside, and endeavored to become pretty. So that I could earn the affection of someone who just possibly might remember me. So that I wouldn't disappoint "him" who just possibly might exist.

I must have lost it.

I pulled off a dramatic transformation in those two weeks. Part of it was that I looked awful to start with, but at the very least, I would no longer be offended if I suddenly spotted myself in a mirror while walking around town. Perhaps not fully "pretty," but I certainly looked more my age.

I had always been a good studier, and proficient at finding the best solution out of the conditions I was given. So once I got the hang of them, even makeup and outfit-picking posed me little trouble. I interpreted makeup to be oil painting with my face as a canvas, and interpreted choosing clothes as an activity akin to evoking the seasons in a haiku. Once I'd done this, it caused the reservations I'd held about them to disappear. And once I'd cleared away those dented feelings, refining my looks became simply fun. I could finally understand why people would pour most of their income into beauty.

I stood in front of a mirror and practiced smiling. I'd always hated my smile. I had the baseless worry that my smile made other people feel unpleasant.

That unease had finally vanished. I was able to give myself a carefree smile in the mirror.

Now I can meet “him” without fear, I felt.

*

And then, the day arrived.

I’ll spare you the details and just skip to the conclusion.

There wasn’t a single classmate I remembered there.

From the beginning of the meetup to the end, I sat in the corner, sipping on beer I wasn’t used to drinking.

On the way home, I felt sick and threw up on the side of the road.

That brought back some of my sanity.

I’ll devote myself to work, I thought.

Because that’s the only thing I have left.

Chapter 10: Boy Meets Girl

I immersed myself in work for about the next six months.

The Mimories I produced in this period were so well-made, even I was cocking my head. Maybe because I'd lost patience with reality (or it lost me), it increased my attachment to fiction? No, not exactly. It also wasn't that I was starting to feel how little time I had left, making me want to leave the world with proof that I lived. The explosive agent was the forgetting caused by New Alzheimer's.

You'd think that when you lose memories, your creative abilities would decrease in turn, but it was actually exactly the opposite. Forgetting had beneficial effects on Mimory creation. Because New Alzheimer's didn't take knowledge, only experiences, it served as a tailwind for a creator of my type. The symptoms would be devastating for a Mimory engineer who referenced their own experiences to make Mimories, but being a Mimory engineer who created Mimories from nothing, forgetting my experiences really wasn't an issue for me. It actually brought many boons: an escape from narrow-mindedness, the destruction of fixed notions, an objective perspective, increased processing speed by freeing up working memory, etcetera.

I wondered if this was why artists tended to like smoking and drinking. Strictly in professions where moments of enlightenment were key, forgetting was a powerful weapon. With it, we could write out line 100 or line 1000 as if it were line 1. We could have both the freedom of an adult and the freedom of a child.

If one of the foundations of identity is a consistent memory, then I was day by day becoming someone who was no one. In early winter, I came to perceive myself as a filtration device placed

between clients and their Mimories. It was the closest you could get to the state of perfect “selflessness” some creators consider ideal. What made it different from selflessness obtained through training was that I was literally losing myself as a person, turning into a two-dimensional representation. Within the year, I lost my memories up to age 18. Less than 10 percent of myself remained within me.

Ever since becoming a Mimory engineer at 16, I had consistently done that job at home, but around fall when I was 19, I slowly started to show my face at the office. Because I felt like I was going mad staying at home alone. There wasn’t a single coworker I could go up and talk to now because of my feigned aloofness, but just having the sense of being near other people was enough. I wanted to taste just the slightest sense that I was part of something.

I kept my disease a secret. I feared no longer getting work more than anything. If I lost that, I’d lose my reason for being. I would have no place in this world. The symptoms of New Alzheimer’s would never be noticed if you kept quiet. Seeing me feverishly back to work after my vacation, my coworkers simply seemed to think “guess she must have gotten some good rest for once.”

One time, I was invited to go drinking. It was a few days before Christmas. While silently facing my computer with headphones on, someone tapped my shoulder from behind. I turned around, and one of my coworkers - a woman in her late twenties, I forgot her name - said something modestly. I didn’t catch what she said, but based on her mouth movement, I think she asked “Sorry, is now a good time?” I took off my headphones and faced toward her.

Some of us are going out to drink, so do you want to come too?, the coworker asked. I stared at her absentmindedly for a while. I looked around, wondering if she was trying to invite the wrong person. But we were the only two left in the office at the time, and her eyes were clearly looking right at me.

I'd be lying to say I wasn't happy. But I instinctively replied like so.

"Thank you very much. But I still have some work I need to finish up before the year is out."

I put up my best civil smile (or actually, maybe it was a naturally-occurring smile) and turned down her invitation. She smiled with some disappointment, then kindly told me "Be sure to take care of yourself."

When she left the office, she gave me a little wave. While I was hesitating over whether to wave back, she closed the door and left.

I lowered my half-raised arm and put my elbows on my desk. I casually looked toward the window to discover that it was snowing. As far as I knew, the first snow of the season.

The last words she said to me kept reverberating in my ears, comfortably vibrating my eardrums. "Be sure to take care of yourself." I was impossibly happy about those words alone, and impossibly saddened that I had felt so saved by those words alone.

The same way a person about to starve to death has no ability left to digest, maybe I no longer had the energy left to accept people's good will. That invitation of hers might have been the last chance I'd have in my life. But even if it were, I also feel like I wouldn't have made good use of it. So it came to the same thing either way.

*

My final client requested that we meet and talk in person.

This wasn't anything unusual. There are tons of clients who think the personal record's information alone is insufficient and ask for a direct interview with the Mimory engineer. Most people are convinced they're the ones who know their desires best. So they attach all kinds of comments; yet if an engineer created Mimories by faithfully following those, few would actually be satisfied. They would speak with irritation about how yes, I can see how my comments are reflected here, but there's something crucial missing. That's where they finally realize that it takes skill and experience to precisely grasp your desires. We're too used to suppressing our desires as we live lives that don't go our way, so it takes expert training to salvage them from the bottommost depths of the heart where they sleep. Thus, there isn't much to be gained from a direct interview between the client and the Mimory engineer. It does far more harm than good.

I was opposed to Mimory engineers meeting face to face with their clients, but coming from a completely different perspective. It was the simple reason that it would create impurities in the Mimories. If the client knew of me, the author of their Mimories, as a person, then whenever they recalled those Mimories, they would incidentally remember me. It would surely cast my shadow behind every word and action in the Mimories. And every time this happened, it would surely deepen the sense that Mimories are just artificial in the end.

That was not what I wanted. The role of a Mimory engineer should strictly be akin to a stagehand's. They should show their face

and make statements as little as possible, and if they must appear in front of people, they shouldn't deviate from the image people would naturally picture from the Mimories. And they should behave as unrealistically as possible. We provide a certain kind of dream to clients, and the guides of dreamland should not be normal, commonplace humans.

In accordance with that creed, I consistently refused to directly meet with my clients. However, a letter that was sent to me in late April greatly shook my belief. Something about the letter was so captivating, it made me feel like I would like to meet this person and talk face to face. Each and every word was carefully chosen, and those words were arranged in the perfect order. And despite this, it cleverly hid the sense of being "a well-crafted letter," having a simple and breezy feel that someone who didn't write for a living would just call "easy to read." I had received many letters from clients before, but none had left such a favorable impression.

The client was an elderly woman, but she accurately understood the brand new job of Mimory engineering, and held great respect for it. It was her hobby to walk with people who'd bought Mimories and hear their stories (as she wrote in her letter, "I have a deep interest not in "what really happened," but "what should have happened""), and my name apparently came up in the process.

She wrote some thoughts about a few of the Mimories I'd created, which were shockingly to-the-point. She hit the nail on the head to make me go "that's right, I did put my efforts into that." When even the clients themselves had never given me such detailed opinions.

I think I'll meet the sender of this letter. If someone who so

intimately knows the way I work wants to meet with me directly, I'm sure it won't be for anything more than that. I sent a reply to the email given in the letter, and made plans to meet five days later.

The client wrote in her letter, "this is a very strange request, so if it's not any bother, I want to meet outside the clinic." She didn't explain what was strange or how, but I assented without thinking too deeply about it. After all, talking about Mimories should be at least a little strange to anyone.

I arrived at the appointed hotel that day and waited for the client in the coffee lounge. I say "hotel," but it had a kind of rustic hospitality, and everything associated with the building was shabby and dirty. The carpet was fully faded, the chairs creaked gratingly when you sat in them, the tablecloths had noticeable stains. However, the coffee tasted awfully good for the price. For some reason, this place reminded me of the hospital I frequently visited as a child. What a calming place, I quietly muttered as I closed my eyes.

The client appeared ten minutes early. I'd heard she was 70, but she looked even older. Her body was bony, her every action was uncertain, and even sitting down seemed laborious, so I was quietly worried we wouldn't be able to hold a decent conversation. But this was a needless fear; once she opened her mouth, she spoke with a clear and youthful voice.

I first politely apologized for making the client walk to see me. Apparently her legs were bad, and she lacked the confidence to walk on unfamiliar roads. "This is a wonderful hotel," I said, and she nodded happily as if I'd complimented a relative. After that, she

once more rattled off thoughts on my work thus far. They were even more courteous and passionate than those in the letter, and all I could do was lower my head and thank her. I had no immunization against someone complimenting me to my face.

Once she'd given her thoughts for a while, she readjusted her posture and cleared her throat. Then she got to business.

She took some envelopes out of her bag and placed them on the table. There were two.

"One is mine, and the other is my husband's personal record," the client informed me.

I looked between the two envelopes.

"Do you mean you're requesting Mimories for the two of you?", I questioned hesitatingly, and she slowly shook her head.

"No, that's not it. My husband left this world four years ago."

I hurried to apologize for my rudeness, but she spoke first.

"I'd like you to create Mimories of myself and my husband."

I had to think for a second about what the difference between those two things was. It felt a little like I was working out a puzzle.

The client placed her hand mournfully on one of the envelopes and began to speak.

"My husband and I met in this town six years ago, and fell in love in a blink. Though a common expression, I feel it should be called a fateful encounter. Like with most fateful encounters, our love was an average and boring thing in the eyes of anyone but ourselves, but I feel the two years I spent with my husband were of far more value than the 60 years that preceded our meeting."

She continued after a long pause strolling down memory lane.

"We spoke together about everything. Anything we could remember since the moment we were given life in this world to the

present. When we fully exhausted all we could talk about, we reconfirmed that ours was a fateful meeting, and at the same time sunk into an abyss of despair. Why, you ask? Because our meeting had been all too late."

She lowered her eyes and clasped her hands tight as if holding something in.

"It is not because we were old. There was a proper timing for our chance meeting, yet it was but one chance, and we let it go. To be specific, my husband and I should have met when we were seven. By missing that chance, the same was true into our teens and our twenties. There was no coming back from it. Perhaps it was lucky that even though we half gave up, we could finally meet each other after we grew old."

And then finally, she spoke her request.

"*What if we had been able to meet when we were seven?* I would like you to replicate that theoretical past. I am well aware that incorporating living people in Mimories breaches the Mimory engineer code of ethics. Even so, I simply must ask if you would take this job."

I could feel the strength of will in her voice. As I sat dumbstruck with a coffee cup in my hand, the client glanced toward the two envelopes on the table.

"I believe a Mimory engineer on your level should be able to understand what I am saying by reading these personal records."

I nodded wordlessly, nervously reached for the envelopes, and put them in my bag.

"I'll ask you pretend you never heard this. If you would like to accept, I will pay five times your standard fee."

After that addendum, she elegantly narrowed her eyes in a

smile.

"If you simply do your job as you always do, that will be perfectly sufficient."

After the client left, I took the personal records out of my bag and started to read them on the spot. Normally you wouldn't want to read personal records somewhere people might see you, but this wasn't an official request in the first place, and more importantly, I couldn't hold back my curiosity about what she meant by "if you read these, I think you'll understand what I'm saying."

Her life, like her writing, was polite, gentle, and comfortable. Though you could hardly call it the best, you certainly could say she tried her very best. There was beauty in a defeat that came only after being beaten down by the limits of possibility. Her way of life was quiet and self-contained prior to meeting her husband, and struck me as infinitely similar to my ideal way of life before my disease. Her personal record had apparently been created right after the two met, so I unfortunately didn't know what kind of transformation her life underwent afterward.

After finishing up the client's personal record in no time, I ordered a coffee refill and a chocolate cake, quickly consumed both, and got started on the husband's record. And one-third of the way in, I understood what the client had been talking about.

It was as she said. The two should have met when they were seven. Not any earlier or any later. It had to be at exactly seven.

If they had met at seven, they probably could've been the happiest boy and girl in the world. In that very short period, the girl held a key that would fit perfectly into the boy's heart, and the boy held a key that would fit perfectly into the girl's heart. They should

have put those keys into each other and achieved perfect harmony.

But in reality, the two hadn't been able to meet at seven. When they ultimately found each other was over half a century later, and by then, both their keys had completely rusted. They had tried them in all the wrong keyholes, taking away their luster. Still, the two knew that the keys would have formerly been able to unlock their old locks.

It could be a happy thing depending on your perspective. There was always the possibility that their lives would end without ever meeting.

Regardless, to me, the pair's much-too-late meeting felt like the world's cruelest tragedy.

I decided to accept the request. Like the client had said, the modeling of Substites after real people goes against the code of ethics used by Mimory engineers. If this breach came to light, my position would be in danger. But I didn't even care. I didn't have long left at any rate. And the chances of a more worthwhile job coming along in my short time left were nigh-zero. Besides, I felt an intimate connection with this old couple. As fellow former "girls without a boy," I wanted to do everything I could to save her.

I was stimulated, having my first request in some time I could get passionate about. For the two who should have met but didn't, I fabricated a past in which they did. In a way, it was a protest about how the world should be. Furthermore, it was revenge. An alternative solution showing how the two really should have been like this. An observation in hindsight that if it were up to me, I could've made better use of these two. In general, I wanted to point out the faults in this world. Through this action, I could indirectly,

satisfyingly condemn this world that couldn't save me.

It suddenly occurred to me: maybe that client could be an image of my future self, from a world where I didn't become a Mimory engineer nor contract New Alzheimer's. I then laughed off that idea. The boundary between myself and others had been getting vague lately. My brain might be starting to wear away.

It was a fun job. I came up with a fated meeting, found the best solutions for the two out of possibilities that could have realistically happened, and saved the soul of my client in a parallel universe. Like I was leaping into the past with time travel and rewriting history.

One month later, the Mimories were complete. Even though it was my first attempt at "blending" two personal histories into one set of Mimories - or maybe because of that fact - it was the greatest work of my career as a Mimory engineer. I secretly gave the Mimories the name "Boy Meets Girl."

I had the finished Mimories written to nanobots without the involvement of my editor, mailed them off to the client (at this point, she was dying of a stroke, but I had no way of knowing that), then went to town and showered myself in beer. Though blackout drunk, I somehow made it home without vomiting, and while stumbling toward the bed to lie down, I bumped into my table and fell over. I'd hit my knee hard, so I groaned for a while. I couldn't muster the energy to stand up, so I closed my eyes and laid down on the floor.

It was an unquestionable masterpiece. Even supposing an ordinary person were given the same amount of time left to live, I was sure it would be impossible to create better Mimories. I had

used up a once-in-a-lifetime miracle on this. If I had even a little talent, I'd probably used up all of that as well. I was completely rid of any desire to continue working.

I might be fine just dying right now, I thought. Taking my life right after I complete the greatest masterpiece of it. The ideal way for a creator to die is for the curtain to close on their life right at the peak of their career. Even a fast food chef has pride as a fast food chef. Whatever anyone says, I could find pride in this.

But how should I die? I wanted to avoid hanging, drowning, or gas if possible. Though I'd lost the memories of my asthma a while ago, my body still clearly pleaded "I don't want to feel suffocation even when I die." In that case, maybe I would jump off a building. Jumping in front of a train wouldn't be bad either. Did I care about causing people trouble? The jeers of the living can't reach the dead.

As I sat with my eyes closed thinking about it, all of a sudden, I felt this awful sensation like bugs were crawling over my body. I opened my eyes and looked around. The white walls and ceiling hurt my eyes, and swept away that black unease. I was scared of the dark lately. I guess I physiologically feared anything related to death. I told myself I was aware of it, but my body kept resisting. The fear of death would follow me to my last.

When I rolled over to clear my mind, I saw an envelope with a personal record on the floor. It had apparently fallen off the table when I bumped it earlier.

The photo beside the profile strangely caught my eye.

It was a young man. The same age as me, even his birthday was close to mine. It was rare for people this young to purchase Green Green. He went to a decent enough college, and his appearance wasn't bad either, so what could dissatisfy him about

reality?

I reached out and picked up the personal record, flipped my body face-up, and read it. And just a few lines in, I felt like I'd been struck by lightning.

I finally found him.
Someone carrying the same despair as me.
Someone tormented by the same emptiness as me.
Someone possessed by the same fantasies as me.
Someone who I should've met at seven.

Chihiro Amagai. To me, he was the ultimate boy.

*

I decided within the day that I would create Boy Meets Girl for myself.

*

It didn't feel like creating a story. I was able to write it as if I were recalling the past. My ten fingers tapped on the keyboard like an automated writing machine. Naturally. I had been working on that fiction from a young age. A patchwork quilt of all the pieces I liked from every story and poem and song I'd witnessed. Even if the surface-level thoughts were gone, these things were etched deep in my soul in the form of preferences. I could just look there and transcribe.

The Mimories I created this way were, however, much clumsier

than those I'd made before. Not because New Alzheimer's had finally destroyed my abilities as a Mimory engineer. The simple reason was that these were Mimories for none other than myself.

Come to think of it, a crucial element for creating superb Mimories was having a level-headed perspective of the client. Needless to say, it was important to empathize with the client, but on the other hand, the client who was the protagonist of the Mimories had to be someone with no connection to me. Why? Because people can't think calmly about themselves. Should the Mimory engineer become the client, the force of their imagination vanishes in a moment, and the world they create assumes a boring, pre-established harmony. As such, empathy has to come from the other shore. I broke all of those taboos.

Regardless, I completed Boy Meets Girl. Though imperfect in form, they were Mimories containing a pure prayer. If this work were to have a wide release, I'm sure no one would praise it. Too much wish fulfillment, too conceited, too childish, they'd complain. But that, I thought, was fine. I don't care if others don't give it recognition. Because this is *a story for me.*

I didn't make just one dose of Boy Meets Girl. There was not only the one from Chihiro Amagai's perspective, but one from Touka Natsunagi's (one consonant different from my real surname "Matsunagi" - truly, the allusion to "summer" gave it a heroine-like air), both made in tandem, to be implanted in each of our brains.

Mimories were said to have a degree of resistance against the forgetting caused by New Alzheimer's. So by doing this, even in the final stages of the disease when all my own memories were erased, the Mimories of "Touka Natsunagi" would stick around for a while.

Then, I would become the real Touka Natsunagi.

Toward the beginning, I didn't intend to do anything beyond secretly sprinkle a trace of myself in the Green Green Chihiro Amagai had ordered. Even if we didn't have a real connection, I wanted someone in this world to be thinking of me. I probably could've died peacefully just knowing that much.

However, people's greed knows no end. As I thought about him offering up prayers for me in a distant town, a small flame lit in my dead heart. Just like I was seeking him, maybe he was seeking me? And not only in memories; maybe he was seeking a relationship with me in real life? Those hopes quietly swelled in my chest.

And so at the end of May, on a starry, comfy night, I devised the Childhood Friend Plan.

I would make these lies into truths.

I would meet Chihiro Amagai as Touka Natsunagi, and fulfill years' worth of dreams.

I would dedicate everything I had left to die as a beloved girl.

That's what I set my heart on.

Of course, there would be many difficulties in the execution. Chihiro Amagai knew that the days he spent with Touka Natsunagi were artificial. If I wanted to create the illusion that his Mimories were real, I had to perfectly play the part of the Substite Touka Natsunagi. I had to make him crave the existence of Touka Natsunagi enough to personally rewrite his own memories. My chances of success were extremely low.

Even so, I thought it was worth giving it a shot. I think I have the right to that. So I chose to bet on that miracle.

The one-sided Childhood Friend Plan that swallowed up a total

stranger's life began like so. The first thing I decided was to make our meeting be in summer. I wanted to actually create the fateful meeting I'd imagined happening in my hometown. I also considered that establishing a "preparation period" would make Touka Natsunagi have a bigger presence within Chihiro Amagai.

There were still about two months to go until summer. I couldn't waste a single second of the time I had left. I told the clinic about my disease and sent in a resignation, and once I was done with all the paperwork, I resumed my initiative from last summer. More thorough than before, and with clearer intent than before. To get if only a little closer to his ideal. So that he would see me as the "heroine." So that before I died, if only for a little bit, I could have a wonderful love.

Early in planning, I considered a meeting at the end of the rainy season, but I wanted everything to be perfect before I met him, so I pushed the plans back a week, two weeks. I knew it would all be for naught if I died before the main event, but maybe because of my renewed zest, the progression of New Alzheimer's temporarily slowed.

Not long after I quit, I heard that the clinic went bankrupt. Apparently it was some bad luck involving failed capital investments or something. It unintentionally came off as if I had jumped from a sinking ship (but that clinic had always felt like all it had was me, so it wasn't impossible to claim I dealt the finishing blow). This was advantageous to me. Now if Chihiro Amagai had any doubts about his Mimories, the place to turn to for questions would be shut down. Medical records are obligated to be preserved for several years, so it wasn't impossible for him to request to see them, but he would have to go through a troublesome process to do so. It would

at least delay him in finding the truth. I did feel a slight worry about the coworker who once kindly invited me to go drinking, though.

By the end of July, my mind and body had achieved the standard I sought. Thinking back, in my teens, I was so focused on work that I neglecting eating, exercise, and sleep, so I looked more aged than I should have. My eyes were bloodshot, my lips dry, my limbs like a skeleton. Those were fun times for what they were, so I didn't care to reject the way I lived then. I did have thoughts about how if I had been born with this sort of appearance from the start, I might have had a happier life. But if things were like that, I probably wouldn't have become a Mimory engineer, and wouldn't be able to find the one and only ultimate boy in this whole wide world.

So I wouldn't curse my fate.

The day after I completed my move while Chihiro Amagai was out at work, I put on a yukata and went out into town. I had never worn a yukata until age 20, so I wanted to get accustomed to it quickly.

I chose a yukata and hair ornaments exactly like the girl I saw when visiting home. A deep blue texture with a simple fireworks pattern, and small red chrysanthemums. I wasn't actually going out to meet anyone, but I even neatly did up my hair. Because that's what I felt "Touka Natsunagi" would do. Given that she was a girl always accompanied by a boy, whom she allowed to see all of her.

Some time after getting on the train, I realized there were many other women wearing yukatas around me. So evidently there was a festival nearby. I got off the train at their stop and followed after the yukata group. As I struggled to walk in my geta sandals, I remarked how this was like a repeat of that day last year. But there

was one crucial difference this year. The person I was hoping to see here wasn't an illusion.

It was a large festival. The whole town was overflowing with energy, carrying a feverish heat. Colorful lanterns and banners gaudied up the street, and the crowds of people wriggled through like a giant lifeform with its own will. Countless taiko drums roared like thunder, blowing out even the buzzing of cicadas. A portable shrine proceeded along the street, shaking in tandem with the shouts of the carriers wearing happi coats and headbands.

The dizzying heat forced me to stop and stand still. This kind of rough activity was a little too stimulating for me now.

Even so, I didn't turn my back to this summer madness. I parted through the congestion and kept moving forward without slowing pace. As if someone was certainly waiting for me beyond it all.

Soon, as if something had led me there, I arrived at the shrine. I knew that I would from the start.

If fated reunions exist, I thought again.

Wouldn't this be the most fitting stage for one?

Much like that prior day, I wandered around the premises. In search of Chihiro Amagai, who would surely be guided by his Mimories to arrive at the shrine like me.

And the two of us who had never met reunited. We passed each other at first, but after walking a few steps, turned around, and clearly acknowledged one another.

That night, the gears of my world finally started to mesh together.

My biggest miscalculation was Chihiro Amagai's overpowering

allergy to fiction. Raised by a textbook dysfunctional family, he vehemently despised Mimories for that reason, and as a consequence. That hatred was ever so slightly greater than his desire to seek the ultimate girl that lurked within him. No matter how favorable a situation was presented to him, if it contained even a tiny portion of fiction, he would reject it.

I should have easily been able to determine that from reading his personal record. And yet, I overlooked it. Though I read over Chihiro Amagai's life enough to recite it from memory, I passed right in front of that fundamental thing. I saw only the similarities between his life and mine, and behaved as if the parts that I needed to comprehend most didn't exist.

But maybe I couldn't blame myself for it. With the end approaching second by second, it's absurd to think I could make calm judgements. I didn't have the time to think about any inconvenient facts. And besides, love makes people blind.

If I had known that his order being Green Green was just the counselor's hasty conclusion, and what he'd actually ordered was Lethe, events would have surely unfolded differently. But by the time the clinic obtained that information, I had long since sent in my resignation and left the workplace. And of course I wouldn't consider that the kind of person who wanted Green Green hated fiction. I decided that he must be like me, a childhood-craving zombie who wanted to reclaim those years he'd lost from the start.

Despite this, even if Chihiro Amagai was *just* a person who hated lies, maybe there would still be a way to deal with that. What further complicated the issue was that he was also the type to become more suspicious the more ideal the situation was. A normal person will more or less interpret things in a way that's convenient

to them, but he was the polar opposite. Whatever you put in front of him, he would immediately assume the worst and refuse to look at it. (This too was a trend I should have figured out from his personal record.)

Chihiro Amagai loved me in my role as “Touka Natsunagi.” There’s no mistake there. But at the same time, he stubbornly refused to admit those feelings. Or maybe, while he did admit those feelings, he dismissed them as a temporary delusion. To him, hope was just a kind of despair, so he thoroughly eradicated it to preserve a mental equilibrium. Before it was even a question of believing my story or not believing it, he was distrustful of happiness itself. The same way I hadn’t even been able to feel loneliness before my disease, he couldn’t even have happy dreams.

Thinking it through, I feel like I would have the same response if I were in his shoes. Something so convenient couldn’t be happening to me. I shouldn’t be able to be this happy. Which must mean there’s something behind this. I’m sure this person, after showing me dreams for just a moment, is going to take that opportunity to push me down into hell. I definitely can’t let my guard down.

When I returned to my room every night, I held my head in my hands. How can I possibly break through this troublesome, double-layered defense? How can I make him believe in both lies and happiness? I would just have to tediously take the time to build up trust after all, I suppose. But I didn’t have that kind of time. Judging from the progression of my disease in the last few months, I would probably lose everything alongside the end of this summer. Not only my memories, but also my life.

Maybe I had gone a little overboard. From the moment I

conceived of the plan, maybe I shouldn't have put in all the effort to become a pretty girl and just gone to meet him, looking as shameful as I was. Maybe I should have disappointed him from the outset, with a "Touka Natsunagi" who had changed for the worse in those five years. Then, at least, he surely wouldn't have been this wary. Instead, maybe I'd earn a sense of closeness, and maybe even secure two more months to build trust.

I had the simple conception that by acting as the childhood friend he wanted, he would eventually become the childhood friend I wanted. However... it took me too long to realize that in terms of The North Wind and the Sun, I was referencing the North Wind's strategy.

But I couldn't take it back now. You can't rewind time.

So what should I do?

When he threw away my cooking in front of me, I strangely didn't feel any anger. This must be my punishment, I thought. I wished for a happiness that was beyond me, used my position as a Mimory engineer to stomp around in a stranger's memories, and destroyed his peace, so this was what I deserved.

I had been wrong about everything from the start. I shouldn't have appeared anywhere outside of fiction. I shouldn't have sought a connection with someone else. I should have been content being alone as the ruler of a self-sufficient sandbox. If I'd just done that, I wouldn't trouble or hurt anyone.

I could easily tell from his expression that it wasn't feelings deep in his heart that made Chihiro Amagai do such things. He just had to overcome the idea of "Touka Natsunagi" to protect his world. His voice trembled with a deep unrest as he threw out my

meal and thrust the plate in my direction. It seemed the sword he swung down to hurt me bounced back and hurt him as well.

But at any rate, this was the time to pull back. His treatment had dealt unrecoverable damage to my heart. I couldn't muster the will to keep up the act anymore. I didn't feel like I could bear another second of the animosity he felt toward me.

Still, I wrung out the last of my energy to keep behaving as "Touka Natsunagi" until I left his room. And once back in mine, I buried my face in my pillow and cried inaudibly.

In the end, nothing about me can be satisfied, I thought. All I got for my blood, sweat, and tears was the sadness of rejection by the one I loved most. And of course, that's something I'd rather have died not knowing.

I gave up on meeting with him anymore, not taking a step outside my room. I didn't fantasize anymore, and no plans circled my mind. I played records at a low volume, and just watched the rain. After the last drop of hope had been squeezed out of me, I was strangely at peace. I had nothing left to expect from my last days, so nothing more could disturb my heart. With a comfortable fatigue like riding the train home from a long trip, I awaited judgement day.

My journey was going to end soon.

I found a dead cicada on my veranda a week later.

The sound of wind woke me up that day. A typhoon seemed to be passing very close. I stood at the window and watched the town as it was devastated by the storm. The fierce winds shook the roadside trees just up to the point of snapping. Signs outside stores were knocked over, flowerbeds scattered, trash cans next to

vending machines flipped over. It almost felt like someone was trying to reshuffle the world with those acts of destruction. I glanced over every inch of the scene from above, then discovered a small dead cicada on the floor of the veranda.

The messenger of summer's end had politely perished right in the middle of my veranda. Had it purposefully jumped down from a thicket and chosen this place to die? Or had it been caught up in the strong winds, lost control, and made an emergency landing here? And while waiting for the wind to settle, had its lifespan run out, its purpose unfulfilled?

Attempting to interpret the message it imparted, I stared at the corpse. August was already half over. This typhoon had probably killed off a number of cicadas. Which would be extinguished first, the crying of the cicadas or my life? I wanted to die while I still heard their annoying buzz, if possible. That would at least distract from my loneliness a little.

That's when I suddenly realized.

There was no need to patiently wait for a death to be handed down to me.

If I couldn't bear to wait, then I could go meet it.

In fact, I had made that same decision once before a few months ago. Resolving to end my life after the completion of my greatest masterwork, but having a sudden change of plans after finding Chihiro Amagai's personal record. If I hadn't found that, one would assume I would've killed myself then and there.

I considered that option once again. Even if I kept living, there was nothing more I could do. Everything I did just backfired on me anyway, so it was futile to try and enjoy the rest of my life. It was better to put a period on it quickly. Before I lost this lull in my heart.

I left my room for the first time in a week. When I opened the door and felt the wind directly, a warning was quietly issued somewhere in my body. The back of my throat faintly ached. Likely remnants of my time with asthma. My body still remembered how I would have attacks whenever a typhoon came along.

I put up an umbrella and walked into the rain. The powerful winds might break it before long, but I didn't care if they did. Because I didn't have to worry about coming home today.

My destination was set from the start. To begin with, there were only so many places nearby you could jump into or jump from. And faced with the choice, I felt it was more suitable for me to jump and fall from a high place rather than jump in front of a train. I'd heard that if you wanted to reliably die from jumping, you needed a height of over 40 meters. So inevitably, the large apartment complex by the highway, about 30 minutes from mine, was the only place that satisfied the conditions.

I headed there.

It was an old apartment complex, so there was just a poor excuse for a fence on the emergency stairs, one which even I could easily clear despite my relatively small size. I didn't see any security cameras, and even if I was found, it wouldn't take me more than five minutes to finish up here. Hardly anyone was walking around because of the typhoon, so no one spotted me hopping over the fence.

I went up the concrete stairs, firmly putting my feet on each step. They must not have been cleaned in a long time, as a light moss was growing on the stairs, which turned slimy from the rain. I would have preferred a sunny day to jump, but my determination

might have faltered if I waited for the weather to clear. And if I saw my first blue sky in a week, the quiet resignation brought about by the long rain might've been blown away. So today was most ideal.

After climbing to floor 15, I bent over and caught my breath. Compared to the lower floors, those near the top were clean and free of moss or mildew. When my panting ceased and the burning sensation in my body withdrew, I grabbed the railing on the emergency stairs. As I put force into my arm to try and lift my body up, I caught sight of something at my feet.

I leaned down and picked it up. It was a firework. A single firework you could hold and light, like they sell at convenience stories and supermarkets. A child living in the apartments was probably playing here in secret and left it behind.

I leaned on the wall and brought the firework near my face, smelling the gunpowder like you would smell a flower.

Touka. That was my name. A fitting name for me, who was born in July; meaning "lit flower" in Japanese, it was bound to bring to mind fireworks that bloomed in the sky.

However, no one had ever properly called me that name. My parents only ever referred to me as "you," and my classmates and coworkers called me by my last name. Whenever anyone spoke my first name, it always came alongside my family name "Matsunagi." That's why I had "him" in my Mimories frequently use my first name. However, the real Chihiro Amagai had only used that name for me a single time. The first time we exchanged words, he whispered it in a doubting voice. That was all. That hardly even counted.

Maybe that name suggested my fate. Like a firework, my life would just have a brief sparkle, then fleetingly burn out and turn to

ash. A launched firework, at the height of its ascent, would burst into a red flower in the night sky; yet just like my name was an inversion of the word for “firework,” I would, at the bottom of my fall, burst into a red flower on the ground.

I found myself laughing at the ironic coincidence. It had been an awfully long time since I last laughed outside of an act. So it made me feel a little better.

I noticed the wind was starting to die down. I leaned on the guardrail, snapped the handheld firework, and dropped it. The firework obeyed gravity and fell, and landed soundlessly on the asphalt.

Now it was Touka’s turn.

I went barefoot, neatly arranged my shoes, then closed my eyes, put my left hand to my chest, and took a deep breath. Then lastly, I apologized to Chihiro Amagai in my heart. I’m sorry for getting you wrapped up in my self-centered plan.

It couldn’t have been any more than ten seconds I spent looking at the firework and thinking. In the long span of a human life, ten seconds is a minuscule margin of error. I’d never heard anyone claim everything would be different if they’d lived just ten seconds longer.

Regardless, this time, those ten seconds greatly changed my fate.

Maybe that firework had fallen from the apartment in my place, buying me those ten seconds. Like a favor between comrades.

That’s how I came to think quite some time later.

As I was climbing over the guardrail, there was an electronic

noise.

At first, I thought it was some kind of alarm sound. Maybe I just now set off the sensor for an intruder alarm, or someone saw me and called it in. But the sound was coming from my pocket. I took out my phone, and when I saw the name on screen, my head went blank.

Chihiro Amagai.

I wiped my rain-soaked eyelids and checked again. Chihiro Amagai.

No mistake. It was a call from him.

I fell into a deep confusion. Why was he calling me now? Don't tell me that at this point, he was now willing to believe my lies? Or maybe he'd finally figured out who I was, and had made preparations to condemn me? Both seemed equally inconceivable. Whether he believed my lies or saw through them, he wasn't the kind of person to make a call himself. He was as passive as possible, so as long as I didn't make a move, he would be content with his personal truth. Coming to apologize or coming to question me didn't fit his character.

After a few seconds of stopped thoughts, I came back to my senses. At any rate, I had to answer the call. I tried to press the accept-call button with a quivering finger. Just then, the phone slipped out of my hand wet with rain and sweat, and danced through the air. I nearly grabbed it back, but it bounced out of my palm, and while it momentarily seemed to freeze in midair, it then immediately fell cruelly down a 15-story distance. I put my shoes back on and ran down the stairs as if jumping down, hopped over the fence, and grabbed my phone, panting. The screen had cracked into pieces, and the power button naturally did nothing.

I need to make sure, I thought. Until I know why he tried to call me, I can't die.

I was lucky enough to quickly catch a taxi in this rural town. I told the driver my destination, and he wordlessly drove. The roads were empty, and I arrived at the apartment in just a matter of minutes. I declined taking the change and got out of the car, then raced up the stairs to the second floor.

And there, I witnessed an unbelievable sight.

Chihiro Amagai was standing in front of my room, pounding on the door, calling my name.

He wasn't wearing shoes, and I could tell he had barged out of his room in a hurry.

He must have been there a long time, as he was wet all over with rain.

After a few beats, I understood what was going on.

He had mistakenly thought I had an asthma attack because of the typhoon.

He was convinced I was doubled over in my room, unable to move.

And he was trying to save me.

...What a fool.

A laugh naturally came out.

I sat on the stairs out of his sight, and listened to the sound of him banging on my door behind me.

Then, I reflected upon the sound of that word I'd heard a moment ago.

I soaked my body in the reverberation of a happy illusion.

Something warm welled up from my chest, and sent tears down my cheek before I knew it.

My vision blurred, and the summer scenery became runny.

He called me my first name.

By now, that alone was enough.

The sound of knocking stopped. I quietly poked out my face to check on Chihiro.

He was leaning on the wall by the door, smoking a cigarette with an absentminded expression.

The wind had stopped, and a ray of light shone through the clouds and lit his face.

I sniffed up my snot, wiped my tears, and stood up.

Then I put on a special smile and stealthily approached him.

I'll keep trying for just a little longer, I thought.

Chapter 11: Your Story

A large envelope arrived to me at the end of September. Inside was Touka's personal record, and a short letter from her.

I looked over the letter first, then read the personal record. The letter was simple: a confession that she had New Alzheimer's, and an apology for using Mimories to try and deceive me. In comparison, the volume of the personal record was massive, and it took me four hours to read.

Forgetting about eating or sleeping, I read it over and over. Apparently, when she was a Mimory engineer, she read the personal records of her clients so much as to commit them to memory.

All the answers were in there. This personal record seemed to have been written when Touka was 18, so I could only guess at what circumstances led to her devising the Childhood Friend Plan, but now that I knew all this about her life, it wasn't a hard guess.

Sensing destiny in the fact she received a personal record from the client Chihiro Amagai, she created Mimories based on the theory of "what if we had met at age seven?", planting them in both our brains to save each other in our memory. Not only that, to make that lie a reality, she played the part of the childhood friend for me.

She chose to live the time she had left as "Touka Natsunagi."

That was probably the truth of it.

What a fool, I thought. She could've just handed this personal record to me and told me "we were fated to meet," and that would do. If I'd been shown her personal record from the start, I would be able to let go and love her. We would've been the ultimate pair

from the beginning, without having to lean on false memories.

It saddened me to think that she could only believe in the power of falsehood to the very end. I lamented her carelessness, being so set on chasing after a vague happiness blown up like a bubble that she overlooked the certain happiness in front of her.

And more than anything, I cursed myself for being so afraid of being hurt that I didn't notice her distress signal.

I'd done something there was no taking back.

Only I could have saved Touka, I'm sure. I could understand her loneliness 100%. I could understand her despair 100%. I could understand her fear 100%.

Yes, the reason I continued to not take the Lethe was because I'd learned the fear of losing memories after taking the fake Lethe. That bottomless fear of losing who I was, the world falling out from under me.

She was battling that the whole time. No one to rely on, no one understanding her, no one consoling her; while she fought all on her own, as if praying for it, she kept waiting for me to have a change of heart.

I suppose I should have let Touka trick me. Like that man Okano who encountered a scammer and got sold an expensive painting, yet continued to believe in the existence of his classmate Ikeda, I should have simply interpreted everything in a way that convenienced me. Then I could have danced happily in her palm.

Or if not that, I should have thoroughly looked into Mimories, like Emori. If I'd done that, maybe I'd eventually stumble upon that interview with Touka. Even if I didn't find that particular article, if I'd simply known that teenage Mimory engineers existed, it was possible I could've independently reached the truth that she was

the creator of my Green Green. Then, maybe, I could have eased her loneliness, despair, and fear just a little bit.

However, I went with the worst option. I refused to believe her words, and yet didn't actively work to resolve my doubts either, leaving the mystery to be a mystery after only a cursory investigation. Why? Because while I was afraid of being tricked by her, on the other hand, I didn't want to wake up from the dream either. For as long as possible, I wanted to preserve a "perhaps" in the space between trust and distrust. I wanted to feign ignorance and accept Touka's affection from a safe place where it couldn't hurt me.

And then she forgot everything. She became unable to remember anything but the past few days, so even the short summer break we spent together had vanished without a trace. When she looked at my face, she didn't seem to know who I was.

The stare Touka gave me when we reunited in the apartment hallway reminded me of the stare my mother, who erased the memories of her family using Lethe, gave me when I saw her again. When I asked if she remembered me, she apologetically shook her head.

I didn't even ask myself "what's going on here?"

I just thought, ah, I've been forgotten by someone dear to me again.

Touka left her room carrying a big bag. I guessed she had come back to prepare for her hospitalization. I watched her go from the veranda. I wanted to chase after her and talk, but my legs wouldn't move. I wasn't confident I could keep my sanity if she gave me that indifferent stare again.

In less than two months, she would probably forget how to

walk. She'd forget how to get meals. She'd forget how to move her body. She'd forget how to use her mouth. She'd forget how to breathe. Beyond that lay an unavoidable death.

As much as I wanted to apologize, the one for me to apologize to was no longer in this world. So I at least wanted to dedicate everything I had left to Touka. I vowed it in my heart. Not only this summer; I would use the rest of my life for her sake. Even after she left this world, forever.

*

I wanted to go meet Touka as soon as possible, but there were a few things I had to do first. I went to a salon and had my overgrown hair cut, then went into town and bought a few new clothes. I chose quality hair and clothes that would make her think of the "Chihiro Amagai" in her Mimories. Back at the apartment, I took a shower and put on the clothes I just bought, then I was finally ready.

Standing in front of the mirror, I looked over my face. I couldn't remember the last time I seriously looked at myself in a mirror, but I felt there was less stiffness in my expression than before. Of course, Touka was probably to thank.

I got on the bus and headed for the hospital I suspected she was at. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, but the oppressive heat had left some time ago, so it was comfortable inside the bus. The level of green visible from the window gradually increased, the bus went around hilly roads by the dam and through a short tunnel, then stopped in front of a small sunflower field. I paid the fare and got off the bus.

Once the bus left, the area was enveloped in silence. I stood there and looked around at my surroundings. The land was surrounded by a dense thicket, with decrepit homes spotted around. The cool air was mixed with a smell of wet dirt.

The hospital was on the opposite shore from the park we repeatedly visited on our bike rides together. There was no guarantee Touka was here. It's just that if she was, it would explain her excessive curiosity about that hospital.

When I stood outside and casually looked up to the second floor, I saw someone standing at the window.

I focused my eyes on that person's face.

It was my childhood friend.

Let's do good this time, I thought.

The hospital room carried a thick smell of death. Not like the smell of a corpse, or even of incense. There was something there that made you feel there was a smell of death. Maybe you could say it lacked a sensation that should always exist in a place with living humans.

Touka was there. It hadn't even been a week since we last met, but she seemed a little skinnier. Or perhaps the shadow of death in the room just made it look that way.

She stood at the window, watching the scenery outside like always. She wore not her usual plain white pajamas, but a faded blue hospital gown. Maybe because it wasn't the right size, the sleeves were folded back. The blue notebook she held in her arm was probably a means for her to externally store memory. That told me how far the disease had progressed. Nothing was written on the front cover, and a cheap ball pen was held within it.

I stopped at the door to Touka's room and looked at her absentmindedly for a long time. She seemed to be finding peace in her hospital room, enjoying relaxation in that dreary place. It felt like the room itself also naturally accepted the presence of Touka.

That sense of harmony gave me a strong gut feeling that she might never leave this place again. And it was probably true. If there was any opportunity left for her to leave this hospital room, it would be after she had become "something that was once her." I couldn't bear to think about it.

Touka would soon be meeting a second death.

I was unable to speak to her. I didn't have the courage to break the intimate connection between her and the hospital room. Besides, I wanted to watch her from a slight distance like this as long as I could. Because this was the first time I'd seen her when she was alone.

Finally, Touka slowly turned around and noticed the presence of her guest. She tilted her head, brushed the hair from her cheek, and stared at my face. Then she said my name in a hoarse voice.

"...Chihiro?"

It's not like she still had the memories. She just found a few common points between me and the "Chihiro Amagai" in her Mimories, and made a natural guess from there. The same way I had reflexively spoken her name the first time we looked at each other up close. The overlap with certain episodes in the Mimories probably also aided her imagination.

"Touka."

I spoke her name very naturally. It was so gentle, I didn't think it came out of my throat. It seemed I didn't need to intentionally act it; I had fully become "Chihiro Amagai."

I'd become Touka Natsunagi's "hero."

Touka looked me over like she was seeing something unbelievable. As if to say "this shouldn't be happening, it must be some kind of mistake." She looked around the room as if looking for a camera crew. But it was just us there.

She asked me, looking terribly confused.

"Who... are you?"

"Chihiro Amagai. Your childhood friend."

I took a stool from a stack in the corner of the room and placed it by the bed, then sat. But Touka didn't move away from the window. With the bed between us, she gave me a wary stare.

"I don't have a childhood friend," she said at length.

"Then how do you know my name? You just called me "Chihiro," right?"

Touka quickly shook her head a few times, put her left hand to her chest, and took a deep breath. Then she spoke as if to convince herself.

"Chihiro Amagai is a Substite. A fictional person who only exists in my head. I've lost my memories down to the roots due to my New Alzheimer's disease. All that's left in me are false memories. It's true that I remember the name Chihiro Amagai, but that in itself signifies that Chihiro Amagai doesn't exist. Because it's forbidden for Substites to be modeled after real people." After saying all this in one go, she threw another question at me. "I'll ask again. Who are you?"

It must have been true that New Alzheimer's only took recollections. She still naturally retained her knowledge about the nature of Mimories - as well as her powers of reasoning.

Of course, I'd anticipated this happening. I briefly considered

coming up with some suitable reasoning to fool her. But I reconsidered.

I wanted to try this again from the start, with the same method she used.

I wanted to carry on her Childhood Friend Plan exactly as-is, and prove that her idea wasn't wrong.

"I'm your childhood friend, Chihiro Amagai," I repeated.

She silently glared at me. Like a stray cat judging its distance from someone.

"If you can't believe me, you don't have to. Just remember this." I borrowed her words from before she lost her memory. "I'm on your side, Touka. No matter what."

*

After thinking it over all night, it appeared Touka reached the same conclusion I once had.

"My theory is that you're a scammer after my inheritance."

That's what she told me as soon as she saw my face the next day.

I dared not to deny it, and asked what thought process brought her to that conclusion.

"I asked my caretaker, and apparently, I'm fairly rich. You intend to lure me into a trap once I've lost my memories and don't know what's going on, don't you?"

I couldn't help but bitterly chuckle. This must be how Touka felt when she was trying to deceive me.

"What's so funny?" Her cheeks reddened as she glared at me.

"Oh, I just remembered something and got nostalgic."

“Don’t try to fool me. Can you prove that you’re not a scammer?”

“I can’t,” I replied honestly. “But if I was after your inheritance like you say, why would I want to act as the Substite Chihiro Amagai himself? I think acting as someone very similar to Chihiro Amagai would be much better at getting into your heart.”

She gave some thought to my counter-argument for a while. Then she spoke coldly.

“That’s not necessarily true. You might have been under the impression I was already losing the distinction between Mimories and memories. Most people have no idea that Mimories are resistant to being forgotten by New Alzheimer’s, after all. Or maybe you thought my mind was so weakened, I didn’t even care about the difference between truth and lies.”

“Or maybe I was putting too much faith in the influence Mimories held,” I appended before she could. “Or else, maybe there was a reason I had to act as your childhood friend himself.”

“Don’t think you can throw me off track like that. At any rate, the human Chihiro Amagai doesn’t exist.”

“I’m guessing just showing you my license or insurance card won’t convince you?”

“Right. That sort of thing could always be faked. Besides, even if you were Chihiro Amagai himself, that’s not proof that you were my childhood friend. These Mimories themselves might have been created to entrap me.”

I sighed. I really was being shown my former self.

“Also, that’s right, we can’t dismiss the theory that you’re doing this for the fun of it. There are people in this world who love to play with others’ hearts and laugh in the shadows.”

“You’re just so pessimistic. You can’t even consider that the boy you saved long ago is now trying to return the favor?”

She resolutely shook her head. “I can’t imagine I have that kind of popularity. I was told how long I have left to live, yet not a single family member, friend, or coworker has come to visit me. I must have lived a lonely and meaningless life. The total lack of any albums or diaries proves that my past isn’t worth remembering. Maybe it will be for the best that I lose all my memories before I die.”

“True, your past might have been lonely,” I acknowledged. “But it certainly wasn’t meaningless. That’s why I’m here. Because you’re my “heroine,” and I’m your “hero.””

“...How stupid is that?”

We had several similar exchanges after that.

“I can’t imagine you could understand one bit,” Touka said, her voice quivering slightly, “but even if they’re fiction, my memories of Chihiro Amagai are my only foundation. It’s no exaggeration to say they’re my entire world. And you’re sullying that holy name. You’re posing as him to attract my affection, but it’s having the opposite effect. I despise you for assuming the identity of Chihiro Amagai.”

“Right. Those memories are more important than anything to you.” I used her words against her. “You won’t consider that’s why they miraculously avoided being forgotten?”

“I will not. If only important memories could remain, there would be at least a few cases of that recognized. And there must be people with New Alzheimer’s who have more wonderful memories than me.”

“But no one’s as attached to memories of a single person as you. Am I wrong?”

The few seconds of silence eloquently told me of the trembling in her heart.

Still, she spoke obstinately.

“Whatever you say, these memories must be Mimories. It’s too good as a story to be true. Each and every memory is too comfortable. The feeling that they were written just to answer my desires comes through clear as day. These are certainly Mimories written based on my personal record. I must have thought that despite the dark life I’d led, I’d at least find salvation in fiction.”

As I was about to speak my next counter-argument, a music box tune began to play to mark the end of the meeting period.

Firefly’s Light.

Our conversation halted as we listened to the song.

There was no room for doubt that she and I were thinking the same thing.

“This really is a kind of curse,” I laughed.

Touka ignored me, but I didn’t overlook the fact that her stiff expression had loosened a little bit.

“I’ll be leaving now. Sorry to bother you. See you tomorrow.”

As I stood up and turned around, she spoke.

“Goodbye, Mr. Scammer.”

She used a blunt tone, but I didn’t sense any animosity.

I turned back, told her “I’ll come earlier tomorrow,” and left the room behind.

For the next few days, Touka continued calling me “Mr. Scammer.” Whatever I tried to say, she could only perceive it as a scammer’s cajolery, and even ironically quipped “You did a good job again today.”

But I soon saw through to the fact it was an act. A far quicker thinker than myself, she realized much earlier on that there was no merit in me behaving like her childhood friend. As well as the fact that I was showing her legitimate affection.

It seemed Touka wasn't afraid of being tricked by me, but of becoming close to me at all. She acted indifferent likely because she drew a line in our relationship. When her guard weakened and she found herself about to act affectionately, she would double down on treating me as a scammer to widen the distance between us and keep self-control.

I could understand how she felt. It was certain that she would soon vacate this world, so she wanted as little luggage as possible. Now, she had the same definition for "things I'm about to gain" and "things I'm about to lose." The higher the value of life, the greater the threat of death. She wanted to keep her value of life at zero, so that when she gave up the ghost, she would also have chosen the right time to give up.

That said, she hadn't seemed to reach such a deep resignation as to completely cast me away, so she was obviously happy when I showed up to her hospital room, and obviously lonely when I left. Even the one time I was so overcome with emotion that I hugged her tight, she showed no resistance at all, and when I moved away from her, she was biting her lip with reluctance. Occasionally she'd slip and call me Chihiro, though was always quick to append "...imitator, Mr. Scammer."

To spend as much time with her as I could, I requested a leave of absence from school, and quit my job. While not at the hospital, I was reading documents about New Alzheimer's, searching for ways to extend her life even though I knew it was meaningless. Of course,

those efforts all ended in vain.

*

Touka's face clouded when I asked her why she didn't listen to music in the hospital room.

"I didn't bring any here. All of the music I had was records. Since I'd only be able to bring some of it anyway, I chose to leave it all behind..."

"Do you regret it now?"

"Just a little bit," she nodded. "It's nice and quiet in this room during the day, but a little too quiet at night."

"I thought as much."

I took a portable music player out of my pocket and handed it to her.

"I put all of the songs you liked on here."

Touka nervously took it from my hand. She touched the screen to figure out how it worked, then put in earbuds and pressed play.

For a while after that, she listened to music. Her expression didn't change, but the slight sway of her body told me she was enjoying it. It seemed like I'd pleased her.

I thought I'd leave my seat for a bit so I didn't bother her. As I quietly got up from the seat, her head snapped up. She swiftly took out the earbuds and went "Um..."

"...Where are you going?"

I told her I was thinking of having a smoke, and she sighed "I see," then put the earbuds back in, returning to the flood of sound.

I went along with my impromptu lie and smoked in a smoking room outside the building. After just three puffs, I put it out, leaned

on the wall, closed my eyes, thought back on Touka trying to keep me from leaving, and let my heart quietly shiver.

Whatever the reason for it was, she still wanted me now. That made me incredibly happy.

When I visited the next day, Touka was still deeply engrossed in music. Her hands were on her ears, her eyes happily narrowed like a cat relaxing in sunlight, and she had just the slightest smile on her lips.

When I spoke to her, she took out the earbuds and greeted me with a friendly “Hello, Mr. Scammer.”

“I listened to all the music on it.”

“All of it?”, I repeated. “I thought the total time of all the tracks was over 10 hours...”

“Yes. That’s why I haven’t slept since yesterday.”

She covered her mouth and yawned, then wiped her eyes with her index fingers.

“Every single song was perfect for me. I was just starting my second loop.”

I laughed. “I’m glad it made you happy, but you should get some sleep.”

But she didn’t seem to hear me. She sat up in bed, showed me the music player’s display, and spoke with a dizzy face. “I’ve listened to this one over ten times already...”

She remembered something and clapped her hands, then put one earbud in her ear, and offered the other to me.

“Let’s listen to them together, Chihiro.”

She’d completely forgotten to call me Mr. Scammer. But it was only reasonable that would happen. Her memories wiped, she got

to listen to the playlist she'd built over her entire life for the first time. There could be no greater luxury for people who love music. (And while it's possible New Alzheimer's didn't make you forget music, it probably made you forget your connection with that music.)

I sat on the bed with her and put the other earbud in my right ear. She switched the player to monaural mode and pressed play.

Old songs I'd listened to with her many times during our summer break began to play.

During the third song, Touka's eyelids began to droop. After making a pendular motion like a metronome for a bit, she leaned her weight on me and fell asleep in my lap. I probably should have laid her down on the bed, but I couldn't move from that position. I carefully reached over and lowered the volume on the player, and I gazed tirelessly at her face.

Suddenly, I had the casual thought that *I was going to lose this person.*

I still couldn't fully grasp what that meant for me. The same way you don't know what the end of the world means for you. The tragedy was just so massive, it was effectively impossible to measure it with my ruler.

In any event, right now I shouldn't be clouded by grief or cursing fate. I should put all that off for now, and just think about how to enrichen the time Touka and I spent together. If I wanted to despair, I could do that after it was all over. Because I would surely have far more time for that than I knew what to do with.

After a nap, Touka finally regained her composure. She apologized for falling asleep in my lap, then stared at my face, and

sighed deeply with resignation.

“Mr. Scammer, you really know just how to make me happy. I hate it.”

I silently lamented the return of “Mr. Scammer.”

“I’m sort of exhausted,” she said listlessly, and collapsed face-up on the bed. “Hey, Mr. Scammer. If you tell me the truth right now, I’ll give you all my inheritance. I don’t have anyone else to leave it to, at any rate.”

“Then I’ll tell the truth. I’m hopelessly in love with you, Touka.”

“Liar.”

“I’m not lying. You must be aware of it too, right?”

She rolled over, putting her back to me.

“...What’s so appealing about a girl as empty as me?”

“Everything.”

“You have bad taste.”

I could tell from her tone that she was smiling.

*

Touka slowly but surely began to smile for me. She came to prepare a seat for me, called “see you tomorrow” when the meeting was over and I left, and made napping in my lap a daily occurrence (though she always called it an accident).

According to her nurse, Touka talked about me constantly when I wasn’t there. “She’s looking out the window all morning, eagerly waiting for you to show up,” the nurse whispered to me.

If she accepted me that much, she should have just gone along with my lies, yet Touka wouldn’t back down on that last line. I was strictly just “Mr. Scammer” gunning for her inheritance, and she

simply dared to enjoy her time with said scammer; she never broke from this stance. Just like a certain someone had once done.

One evening, Touka sounded melancholy as she leaned on my shoulder.

“I must be quite the prey in your eyes, Mr. Scammer. I’m so weakened that if you showed me a little kindness, I feel I might just give in.”

Though I guess I more or less have given in, she quietly appended.

“Then I’d be happy if you fell for it harder and recognized me as your childhood friend.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Am I really that shady?”

After about a three-comma pause, she answered.

“I can somehow tell your affection isn’t a lie. But...”

“But?”

“I mean,” she said hoarsely, “all my memories have been erased, but my memories of a single boy are still around. I was abandoned by my family and have no friends, but that boy comes to visit me every day without fail. You say you like me even though I’m worthless and can’t even work anymore. Who can could such a contrived story?”

“...Right. I thought the same way.”

She jumped up and stared a hole through my face.

“You admit you’re lying?”

“Nope.” I slowly shook my head. “I think it’s inevitable that you can’t believe me. I’m painfully acquainted with the feeling of seeing anything too good to be true as a trap. ...But sometimes those things happen in life, by some mistake. Just like a life of only

happiness is highly unlikely, a life of only misery is highly unlikely too. Can't you believe a little more in your happiness?"

Those words were also directed at my past self.

I should have believed in the happiness I had then.

Touka fell silent to ponder my words, but soon let out a breath.

"At any rate, having happiness this late is just empty."

She put her left hand to her chest to suppress her heartbeat, and smiled weakly.

"So I'm fine with you being Mr. Scammer."

But that was the last day she was able to keep up that bluff.

The next day, I was greeted in the hospital room by the sight of Touka sitting in bed, holding her knees, and trembling.

When I spoke, she lifted her head and tearfully said my name, "Chihiro." Not Mr. Scammer.

Then she got off the bed, stumbled over to me, and buried her face in my chest.

As I stroked her back, I tried to think about what could've happened to her.

But really, I didn't have to think about it.

The time that had to come, had come. That's all it was.

Seeing that Touka was regaining a little composure, I asked her.

"Have your Mimories started to vanish too?"

She nodded slightly in my chest.

My ears quietly rang.

For an instant, I felt an uncertain sensation, like the world had shifted a few millimeters.

The erasure of Mimories.

That signified that she was finally approaching true zero.

It meant we didn't have have a month left.

The next thing this demon would lay its hands on was her life.

From the moment she learned she had New Alzheimer's, she knew this day would come.

She should've accepted it by now. She should have been ready.

But in the end, I didn't know anything.

That day, I learned the true reason Lethe was developed.

At age 20, I finally understood what it was that people used the power of tiny machines to try and forget.

She kept crying for hours. As if she were trying to wring out all the tears she had absorbed in her life.

By the time the westering sun filled the hospital room with a pale orange, she'd finally stopped crying.

In the corner of my blurred vision, I saw her long shadow sway.

"Hey... tell me about the past."

Touka spoke in a dry voice.

"Talk about me and Chihiro."

*

I spoke to Touka of false memories.

The day we first met. The time I was convinced she was a ghost. Biking around town with her sitting on the back. Visiting her house every day on summer break and talking through the window. Reuniting in the classroom the next school term. Being appointed as the only friend who would look after her, as she couldn't fit in at school. Coming to pick her up every morning and walking to school together. Being together on weekdays, weekends, at every

moment. Her constantly holding my hand. Our classmates teasing us for our relationship in the later grades. A heart with our names in it being drawn on the blackboard. Me trying to erase it, but her saying to leave it. Listening to records over and over in a drab study. Her proudly explaining the meanings of lyrics. Staying over at her house on days off. Watching a movie screening together and feeling awkward when there was a risque scene. Sitting next to each other on the bus for a hike. Her nearly running out of energy in the mountains, and me letting her have my shoulder. Telling friends in a tent at outdoors school who the girl I liked was, and it spreading around class the next day. Her having received similar treatment. Us getting paired up for a folk dance, and her hanging her head the whole time. Her having a serious asthma attack during summer in sixth grade. For some time after that, her being beside herself with worry every time she coughed. Me writing “I hope Touka’s asthma gets better” as my Tanabata wish, and her eyes watering when she saw it. Starting clubs in middle school and having less time to be together. Being in separate classes for the first time in second year of middle school. That causing us to start viewing each other as potential romantic partners. Our way of interacting getting slightly awkward. Her always waiting in the classroom for me to finish my club activities. The two of us learning incorrect lyrics to Firefly’s Light. Being teased by our classmates in third year, in a different way than elementary school. Deciding to spread all kinds of real and fake rumors about our relationship, and suddenly no longer being teased at all afterward. Her face turning bright red when she heard that. Being chosen as the anchor for the relay at the track meet. Collapsing after running as fast as I could, and being nursed by her in the infirmary. The summer festival at age 15 being somehow

special. How wonderful she looked in her yukata. Putting up our defenses and exchanging a sly kiss. That kiss being not the third or the fourth, but the fifth. Both of us acting like we didn't feel anything to preserve the status quo. Withdrawing from our clubs, having more time together, and being glad for it. Me bringing alcohol from home to help console her family troubles, and drinking it together. Then us cutting loose a little too much. Not being able to make eye contact the next day out of awkwardness. People catching on during preparations for the culture festival, and putting us together. Talking in a pitch black classroom about things we usually wouldn't. The pretty moon we saw from the veranda. Having a secret rendezvous on the night of a field trip. Acting together when groups were allowed free time, and the others tacitly consenting. Going to the library together and studying so we could go to the same high school. The first snow of the season falling on the way home from the library. Catching her frolicking under the snow and streetlights. Purposefully not bringing gloves because I wanted to hold her hand as we walked home. Us talking strangely little after New Year's. Her move date already being decided by that time. Getting more elaborate chocolate than usual for Valentine's. Her finding out that I kept the empty boxes of her Valentine's chocolates every year and laughing. Suddenly finding out about the move and being harsh to her. Making her cry for the first time. Coming to her house at a later date to apologize and reconcile. Promising to meet each other even after we went our separate ways. Her being more prone to tears as graduation approached. Her laughing while crying, and crying while laughing. Going around town together after graduation and talking about our memories. Meeting in the empty study the day before her move

and talking about heroes and heroines. Things that might have happened between the two of us. Things we wanted to happen. Things that should have happened.

I kept talking about everything I could recall. Touka listened with a peaceful expression on her face, like listening to a lullaby. When she heard an episode she remembered, she smiled and said “There was that,” and when she heard an episode she forgot, she smiled and said “So there was that.” And she made short notes in the blue notebook she held.

When I told her of memories from age 7, she became a 7-year-old girl, and when I told her of memories from age 10, she became a 10-year-old girl. Of course, the same thing happened to me. In that way, we relived the span from age 7 to age 15.

I realized I was talking about episodes that weren’t contained in the Mimories only when I was nearing the end of the story.

The Green Green Touka had created left plenty of blank space. Maybe she didn’t have enough time to work on it, or maybe she thought it was sufficient to include a minimum number of effective moments. Either way, there was room there for free interpretation. Unknowingly, I filled in the gaps with my own imagination.

By adding essential episodes based on an essential idea, I provided complementary details to the Mimories. Those anecdotes blended into Touka’s story very naturally, and resonated with it, making the Green Green more colorful by the day. While I was away from the hospital, I kept revising our story. I could beautify the past as much as I wanted through my interpretation - as long as I stayed true to my imagination.

But even trying to fill in every nook and cranny of the blank

space, there was a lack of memories. In five days, I had told everything contained within the Mimories, leaving nothing out. When I finished talking about the day we promised to reunite and Touka moved away, there was nothing left after.

A hollow silence endured.

Touka asked innocently:

“What happened next?”

Nothing happened next, I said in my mind. You only made Mimories from age 7 to age 15. The story neatly tied up here, and the only girl who would know the rest was no longer in this world.

Even so, I couldn’t just put a period on the story here. This story was the last thread tying her to life. I felt that the moment she lost that thread, her empty body would be blown away by the first breeze, taking her far away in the blink of an eye.

So I decided to take the baton of Touka’s fantasizing.

If her story had ended, my story had to begin here.

Taking the same approach I used to fill in the blanks of the Green Green, I ran a detailed simulation of our lives from age 15 to age 20. I produced a proper “continuation,” in which we who were put far apart overcame that distance and obtained an even stronger love.

So I told it. Touka seemed to accept my story naturally, the same as before.

Day after day, I kept weaving lies. As if I were Scheherazade in One Thousand and One Nights, I prayed that perhaps the longer I kept the story going, the longer Touka would live.

For those two weeks, it felt like Touka and I were the only people in the world. We huddled together like the last survivors of humanity, sitting and talking about old memories on a sunny porch

as we watched the end of the world.

And very soon, I would be the only survivor.

*

Just once, I had a dream. A cure to New Alzheimer's had been perfected, Touka was chosen as a test subject, and once she was cured, all her memories revived. I came to pick her up when she left the hospital, we hugged and shared our joy under a clear blue sky, and as we held pinkies promising to make some real memories together, I woke up.

A cheap happy ending, I thought. Sudden, forceful, and all too harmonious. It might be allowed in Mimories, but it would absolutely be derided in any other medium. Miracles are only allowed to exist somewhere away from the main thread.

But I didn't care. It could be cheap, sudden, forceful, unrealistically harmonious. I didn't care how poorly-made a story it was. I prayed for that dream to become reality.

I mean, it hasn't even started yet. Our relationship was only just beginning. A real love budded from the commonality deep in our souls, and with that, our long loneliness should have been rewarded.

But in reality, it was over before it even began. The end credits were already starting by the time she truly understood me, and the audience was starting to leave their seats by the time I truly understood her. Our love was like a cicada in October, having nowhere to go and simply perishing. It was all just too late.

What if we could be given only a month's postponement? It would just add on a month's worth of happiness and a month's

worth of unhappiness, I concluded while thinking late into the night. The efforts I expended looking for possibilities would probably make it that much harder to part.

A love that ended the moment it began, or a love that ended just before it began - which is more tragic? Maybe it's a meaningless question, though. Those two tragedies are both the worst, so you can't give an order to them.

*

A story is something you can continue to write for as long as you feel like. The reason stories always come to an end in spite of this is not because the writer demands it, but the story itself does. Once you hear that voice calling, no matter how much you feel there's not enough story, you have to come to a suitable compromise and leave the story. Like the shoppers who hear Firefly's Light.

One afternoon in October, just after the clock passed 3, I heard that voice calling. I knew that the story I was telling had ended.

I still had some blank space I could squeeze anecdotes into. However, it wasn't space that was the issue. Nothing more existed that I felt could be added to my story.

That meant the story had been finished.

Any further additions would be superfluous. I knew that from my senses as a storyteller.

It felt like Touka, sitting beside me, intuitively understood that too as a former Mimory engineer. She didn't ask "What happened next?" anymore. She closed her eyes and soaked in the echo for a few minutes, but soon she got off the bed, stood by the window,

and did a stretch. Then she let out a little breath and turned around.

I knew she was about to say something. But I felt like I couldn't let her say it. If I let her say it, there'd be no going back.

I desperately looked for words to follow up my last sentence. But I couldn't think of a single one that I should add on.

Then, she broke the silence.

"Hey, Chihiro."

I didn't respond. It took all I had to resist it.

She kept going anyway.

"Before you came today, I was rereading my notebook and wondering. Why are you doing all this for me? Why do you know the contents of my Mimories? Why do you keep acting like my childhood friend?"

After a short silence, she smiled ephemerally.

"Chihiro."

She used my name again.

"Thank you for going along with my stupid lies."

Right.

Lies are something that are always exposed.

She sat back down next to me, and looked up at my hung head from below.

"I was the one who started lying first, wasn't I?"

I kept my silence for a long time, but realized it was futile, and replied "Yeah." Touka just said "I see" and smiled with her eyes.

We didn't need any further explanations. She had seen through to the truth with her astonishing imagination and the fragmented information recorded in her blue notebook. That was it.

She didn't appear disappointed. That said, she also didn't

appear pleased that everything was a lie. She just appeared to be thinking about the complex story that had been put on between the two of us.

Outside the window, an airplane drew a thin line in the blue sky, which then vanished. The massive cumulonimbus clouds that occupied the August skies were gone without a trace, and only tiny clouds like scrapes on a car remained.

Far in the distance, there was the sound of a railroad crossing. The train blew its horn, the sound of it racing down the track grew distant, and a few seconds later, the crossing sound stopped.

Touka muttered something.

“It’d be nice if it were all true.”

I shook my head.

“That’s not right. It’s because this story is a lie that it’s much kinder than the truth.”

“...You’re right.”

She linked her hands together in front of her chest, as if holding something, and nodded.

“It’s kind because it’s a lie.”

*

I have a last request, Touka said. It was her final lie.

She took a white medicine packet out of a cabinet drawer and handed it to me.

“What’s this?”, I asked.

“The Lethe that was in your room, Chihiro. The one that should have come to you in the first place: the Lethe to erase the memories of your childhood.”

I gazed at the package in my hand. Then I guessed her intention.

If she was returning the Lethe to me at this point... then it would be like that, would it?

“I want you to drink it here.”

She spoke what I expected her to, word for word.

“I want your childhood to only belong to me.”

If she wanted it, then I had no reason to refuse. I nodded without a word, left the room to buy mineral water from a vending machine, then returned. I poured the water in the glass Touka had prepared, tore open the package, and dissolved it.

Then I drank it in one gulp.

It didn’t taste bitter, or like it had any foreign substance at all. It was really just like regular water.

But before long, the effects of the Lethe started to show. I casually reached into my pocket, but something that should have been there wasn’t, but I couldn’t remember what that was - vague yet urgent anxieties like that hit me one after another. But those evil hands all turned to ash before they could touch me and scattered to the wind. That’s what the fear of forgetting was like.

“It’s started?”, Touka asked.

“Yeah,” I said, pushing my fingers against my forehead. “Seems like it has.”

“Good.”

She stroked her chest with relief,

“That was a lie, earlier.”

and then told me a spoiler.

“...Lie?”

I slowly looked up.

Touka was there smiling sadly.

“What you just drank, Chihiro, was the Lethe to erase your memories of me.”

With that, she took out another package of Lethe from the cabinet drawer and showed it to me.

“This is the real one.”

My vision warped. The Lethe seemed to really be getting to work now. I had the illusion of my body being torn apart, and without thinking, I opened up my hands to make sure I still had ten fingers.

“Sorry for always lying. But this is my real deal final lie,” she said in a sing-song voice. “Before I lost my memories, apparently I was always worried about bothering you until the very end, Chihiro. Still, I wanted to stay with you for as long as I could, so I entrusted the role of wiping the slate clean to my post-memory-loss self.”

Touka stood up from bed and tore the other Lethe package, then scattered the contents out the open window. The nanobots were carried away on the wind and vanished like smoke.

She spun around and smiled healthily.

“We’ll have the fact we even met end as a lie.”

I looked toward the clock by the bed. Six minutes had already passed since I drank the Lethe. If my memories would be erased in thirty minutes, I had twenty-four left. No matter how much I struggled, there was no resisting Lethe once you drank it. Even if I threw up the entire contents of my stomach, the nanobots had already reached my brain.

I gave up on resistance and asked her.

“Can I hug you until I forget?”

“Sure,” she said happily. “But you might be a little confused when you forget everything.”

“I’ll bet.”

“I’ll say it’s something I asked for. Like I wanted to feel someone’s warmth before I died.”

“But that’s the truth, isn’t it?”

She laughed. With a sound between “ehehe” and “ahaha.”

*

Every minute, Touka asked me.

“Still remember?”

I replied each time.

“Still remember.”

Good, she said, and nestled her face against my chest.

*

“Still remember?”

“Still remember.”

“Good.”

*

“Still remember?”

“Still remember.”

“There, there.”

*

“Still remember?”

“Still remember.”

“But we’re getting there.”

*

An hour elapsed.

Touka gently parted from me and stared at my face, dumbfounded.

“...Why do you still remember?”

The laugh I’d been holding in burst out.

“At least it’s both of us being liars.”

She didn’t seem to understand what I meant.

So I also spoiled it for her.

“What I drank was the Lethe to erase the memories of my childhood.”

“But you never even had a chance to switch...”

She gasped, and shut her mouth closed.

That’s right. There were plenty of chances.

If you went further than two months back.

“Could it be...” She gulped. “*You switched them from the start?*”

I nodded.

“I knew you would probably play this kind of trick, Touka. So I believed in you and drank it.”

That first night I threw Touka's home cooking into the trash, I prepared a little trick that could help me get the jump on her. Namely, I switched the two packages of Lethe.

My thoughts went like so. For the time being, all she had stolen was my spare key, and she hadn't touched the Lethe. But if she was a scammer, then the moment she saw it, she would definitely try to use it for nefarious purposes. If she erased my childhood memories, the market share of "Touka Natsunagi" in my memories would shoot up. There would be no one for me but her.

Of course, if all I wanted was to avoid such an outcome, I just had to hide the Lethe out of her sight. I could throw it in a locker at school or work and lock it up. But I went and kept the Lethe in an easy-to-find place. That was a trap to force her into action. I thought I'd set out some good bait to advance the situation.

And to really play a trick on her, I swapped the two Lethe packages. By doing this, if she did something like slip the Lethe into my drink, I would only lose the memories of Touka Natsunagi.

But later on, unexpectedly, Touka switched out the Lethe. Both of the packages were replaced with fake powder. The stolen Lethe stayed in Touka's hands, and before she completely lost her memories, she got the idea of using it to erase all my memories of her. She didn't even consider that I had swapped which was which.

Touka sent a message to her future self. (Presumably, she timed it to arrive just before her life ran out.) But reading the letter from her past self, Touka probably thought this: Even if I say "please forget about me," I know Chihiro Amagai isn't the kind of person who'll just listen and obey. So she made the plan of lying "I want your childhood to only belong to me," and having me drink the switched Lethe.

Her miscalculation was that I too saw through that tendency of hers. The moment she told me “I want your childhood to only belong to me,” I knew that was a lie. True, she was a self-centered and selfish person, but she wasn’t the type to take something from me at the very, very end. That clearly went against her behavior.

After all, she was a girl trying to be a “heroine.”

I believed in her lie and drank down the Lethe without hesitation. If the Lethe was still switched, that would defy her expectations and actually erase the memories of my childhood.

I won that bet. Now, my childhood had only Touka.

“...I’m no match for you, Chihiro.”

She lost her strength and collapsed back on the bed. Then she spoke with stunned amazement.

“I’m sure you’ll become a much greater liar than I ever was.”

“Maybe so.”

We laughed together. Very affectionately. Like real childhood friends.

“Now, since that was your last lie back there, I’ll have you answer my next question honestly.”

Touka slowly sat up. “What?”

“Were you disappointed that I didn’t forget you?”

“Not at all,” she immediately replied. “I’m as happy as could be that I can keep talking with you, Chihiro.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Hey, Chihiro.”

“What?”

“You want to kiss?”

“...Shoot, you said it first.”

“Ehehe.”

We gently brought our faces together. And not to confirm anything, but just to kiss, we kissed.

*

The next day, Touka’s condition took a sudden turn. At least, those are the words the doctor used. But I didn’t feel a shred of the tension that the words “sudden turn” brought to mind. Just as a firefly’s light soundlessly disappears into darkness, her final moments were quiet and peaceful.

On a clear, pleasant October morning, the curtain fell on Touka’s short lifetime.

It rang in the end of the short summer that felt like an eternity.

Chapter 12: My Story

On a Saturday afternoon in August, I had a coincidental reunion on a back street in Harajuku with Emori, who I thought I'd never see again. I'd hit a good stopping point in my work and was out stretching my wings, and he was sightseeing on a business trip. We thought it was someone else at first and kept walking, but after taking a few steps, we both turned around and said each other's names. We last saw each other in summer at age 20, so it had been a full 10 years.

When he heard I was working at a clinic in the area, he asked if there were any stores I recommended. I replied that I didn't really have any recommendations. "Well then," Emori said, then bought a case of beer from a store he had his eye on. He looked up where the nearest park was, and we went there.

We sat on a bench by the fountain and drank our beer. The park was filled with a smell like you were breathing green, and the smell of cooked asphalt. The morning radio said this would be a record-breakingly hot summer, and the heat certainly was outrageous. Many of the people in the park were cooling off in the shade of the trees. I was fine, having just a T-shirt on, but Emori in his suit had his sleeves rolled up to the elbow and frequently wiped his face with a handkerchief.

We didn't bring up a single topic like "how's work doing?", "are you married?", or "do you have kids?"; we just had a rambling chat, like we were friends who met up every week.

After laughing together for a while, Emori clapped his hands with a "come to think of it..."

"Half a year ago, I went and bought some Mimories."

“Huh,” I said, feigning disinterest. “Was it Green Green?”

“Nope, not that one.” He wagged his finger. “I went with this new one developed recently, called Heroine.”

“Heroine,” I repeated.

“Yeah. Green Green and Boy Meets Girl looked pretty attractive too, but I landed on Heroine. Anyhow, they’re the perfect Mimories for me. They aren’t simple fakes like common Mimories. There’s this nested structure where there are fake memories inside the fake memories...”

I listened to his explanation in silence.

I decided not to tell him that I was the creator of Heroine.

Touka’s death could be equated to the end of the world, yet it didn’t bring even the slightest change upon the world. It was how it was. In accordance with her will, there was no wake or funeral of any kind, she wasn’t cremated, and she naturally didn’t have a grave made either. When I went to greet Touka’s parents later, neither remembered their daughter. They’d probably made the same choice as my mother. With this, all traces of her existence were wiped away. As if a human named Touka Matsunagi had never existed in this world to start with.

My life went back to normal, and the simple days before I met her returned. Occasionally, I would get a suspicion that the events of that summer were all a dream. Touka’s traces barely remained only in the memories of myself and a very small number of acquaintances. An entity in memory only. Thinking of it that way, Touka Matsunagi was hardly any different from a Substite. About the only decisive difference was that her name was recorded on a census.

Since realizing that, I could no longer discard fiction just because it was artificial. If you really think about it, there's not a big difference between things that happened in reality and things that might have happened in reality. No, maybe I should say there is no difference. What distinguished them was akin to whether or not identical products had a brand logo or a guarantee card; *they were fundamentally equal.*

With my renewed acknowledgment of fiction, a year after Touka's death, I dropped out of college to become a Mimory engineer. It didn't take any special effort. During that month in the hospital room with Touka, I acquired all the skills a Mimory engineer needed. I tried applying for a public recruitment, and got accepted in one shot.

Even if I wasn't as good as Touka in her lifetime, I worked on the front lines as a decently famous Mimory engineer. I wasn't picky about what requests I accepted, but my areas of expertise were naturally Green Green, Boy Meets Girl (as originated by Touka), and my own creation, Heroine.

My coworkers all found it bizarre. Namely, because I had never had a single romance worth calling romance in these ten years. I would get asked, how are you able to so vividly depict happiness you've never experienced yourself? I told them "because I've never experienced it," though maybe it's a stretch to call that answer accurate. But I had no obligation to explain all the details, so I didn't say any more.

Just the other day, I was interviewed by a certain magazine. The interviewer's name sounded familiar, so I decided to check, and it was in fact the same writer who interviewed Touka at age 17. The strangest coincidences do happen.

“I’d like to ask you one last thing,” the reporter said. “Mr. Amagai, how would you briefly describe the job of a Mimory engineer?”

I thought about it briefly, then answered like so.

“It’s the job of creating the world’s kindest lies.”

That’s what Touka had taught me.

I’d turned 30 this year. I wasn’t married, and had no one in mind either. I also had no real friends excepting Emori. I’d hadn’t even seen Nozomi Kirimoto, the one person who thought of me in middle school, since that last meeting. I took up residence in a quiet town about an hour by train from the city, and lived there peacefully. I woke up early every morning, poured some coffee, grappled with work in the morning light, kept my room clean, got regular exercise, cut down on smoking and drinking, read books, occasionally went to see movies, bought ingredients from the supermarket in the evening, made elaborate meals, and spent the night listening to records. A life so healthy, maybe it was too healthy. The only difference from that summer was that Touka wasn’t with me.

I still hadn’t gotten over her death. Maybe I should say I didn’t feel the desire to. At least for the next ten years, I probably wouldn’t make any friends or lovers.

It’s not like I was doing it as a duty for the departed Touka. I’m sure she wouldn’t have wanted it. If she saw me now, no doubt she’d say “what a fool” in amazement. “You could just forget about the dead and be happy already,” she’d laugh. Apologetically. Mournfully. Just a little happily.

So I couldn’t love any person but Touka. I wanted her to always

be laughing “what a fool” in my memories, so I wouldn’t fix my foolishness.

The Mimories I made quietly employed a little trick. It’s a bit like a computer virus. The virus would activate only in people who were on the same wavelength as me. Every time the virus activated, the infected would be possessed by the illusion that there was a “heroine” (or perhaps a “hero”) somewhere in this world. They would always carry a feeling that everything they’d obtained up to now was a sham, and they would never be happy unless they could obtain the real thing.

I didn’t make “you” have that experience because I wanted more companions, nor was it to make you taste the same suffering. My fated partner exists somewhere in this world - I believe that as truth from the bottom of my heart. And I’m praying that at least one more person in the world will believe that truth.

Fated partners exist. It might be a person meant to be your lover, it might be someone meant to be your best friend. It might be someone meant to be a buddy, it might be someone meant to be a good rival. At any rate, the world divvies up “people who you should meet,” one per person, but the majority of people never meet that other person, and their lives end having settled for imperfect relationships.

That other person might be the clerk with the wonderful smile at the convenience store you always use. It might be the salaryman with an exhausted face you always see on the commuter train, or the sulking student who’s always skipping class at the arcade you pass by. It might be the traveler at the train station with heavy bags who nervously asks you for directions, it might be the poor drunk

vomiting in the business district early in the morning. It might be the man with an annoying snore sitting next to you on the night bus, it might be the awkward girl you pass by only once on the street.

No matter what it is, when you meet that person, you'll feel something you can't put into words. Like smelling a nostalgic smell, or coincidentally passing through a town you visited when you were a kid but don't know the name of, you're hit with a painful homesickness. But you're unable to trust your intuition. Because humans with common sense understand that fated partners only exist on TV, in movies, and in romance novels.

And so you pass your fated partner by. You'll never meet them again in your life. Some years or decades later, you'll suddenly remember that day. And you'll realize that not only has your impression of that person not faded, that moment that should've meant nothing shines brighter than any of your memories. No, that can't be; you laugh it off. Something like that's straight out of a movie, it wouldn't happen. That's what you tell yourself, and you seal that sparkle deep in your memories.

But if you're the kind of person who's able to believe in a "heroine," it might be a different story. After passing that person by, you might be able to let your intuition guide you and turn around. And at that moment, if your partner is also able to believe in a "hero," they might just turn around too. You might look at each other for a brief moment, and find something important deep in each other's eyes. There's still a considerable possibility you'll then turn and walk away, of course. But even so, perhaps you'll be able to call to each other, as if neither spoke first. And for the first time, maybe you might learn the reason you were born into this world.

I'd like to open up the space in people's hearts to allow even one more of those miracles to occur. That blank space, in most cases, will just get in the way of living. No matter how fulfilled a life you lead, that sense of absence will continue to cast a small shadow on your life. Yes, this is also a kind of curse.

You might resent me for that fact. I'm content with accepting that resentment. Because in the end, this experiment is just for my own self-satisfaction.

*

At the end of that summer, I received a request to give an address at my alma mater, and visited home for the first time in ten years. After the address, I had a basic meal with the people involved, said goodbye, and wandered the town aimlessly. I didn't observe any notable changes, but it sufficed as an hour-long stroll.

I sat on a bench and drank a canned coffee as I watched the sunset. As I decided it was about time to go home and sat up, some little girls dressed in yukatas passed in front of me, laughing amongst each other. I stood there and watched the girls from behind.

I'm being called for, I thought.

I walked in the direction the girls left. There was a festival taking place nearby. I was getting hungry around that time, so I bought beer and yakitori from the stands, and sat on the stone steps to eat by myself. I hadn't had alcohol in a long time, so I quickly got drunk.

I had a short dream. It was so vague, I almost couldn't remember what it was like, but I think it was a happy dream.

Because it made me feel very sorrowful.

When I woke up from my nap, the area was covered in darkness. The cries of summer night bugs were already starting to mix with those of autumn bugs.

After I threw away my trash and was about to leave, I heard an explosive sound from somewhere. I looked up on reflex, and saw a firework launched into the night sky. The next town over must have been doing a fireworks show. I looked down,

and I smelled the same wind as I did that day.
I unconsciously slowed my pace.
I looked over my shoulder.
Among the crowd, I instantly spotted her.
And she, too, was looking back at me.
Yes, there was a girl there.
Black hair ran down to her shoulder blades.
She wore a deep blue, fireworks-patterned yukata.
With attention-grabbing pale skin.
And red chrysanthemums in her hair.

I smiled slightly. I faced front again, and resumed walking.
Goodbye, I thought I heard from behind.

*

It was only for three months, but I had a childhood friend.